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The Foragers' Almanac

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Introduction

I used to catalog lives by Latin names and pressed petals—the kind of immortality that fits between archival sheets and whispers of old glue. The day the radios hissed their last weather report, I closed the herbarium and opened the door to a different taxonomy. Pavements became streams of silence. Lawns went feral. Grocery aisles, once bright rivers of abundance, turned into long, reflective mirrors of what we thought we could always buy. In the hush that followed, I learned to read the world again, not with a lecturer’s certainty but with a pilgrim’s listening.

This book is a road I walked and a map I made after. You will not find the old borders here—no city limits, no property lines, only the soft edges where the domesticated remembers the wild. I travel the grid of former cul-de-sacs and soccer fields, tracing green seams along fences and drainage ditches, finding company in volunteer orchards and the stubborn constellations of backyard herbs. Each chapter is a mile marker written in chlorophyll and rust, a note to anyone who follows that the living world still keeps time.

Though what follows is a story, it is also a ledger of what the story required: the patience to watch a plant’s shadow move across a day; the courage to taste the bitter and hear what it is telling you; the art of turning plenty into future by way of jars and slow transformations; the practice of carrying your breath like a lantern. These pages collect what I learned with cold fingers and a hopeful stomach, and what I refuse to forget: that knowledge can be both shelter and song.

There are drawings scattered throughout these accounts—simple, faithful sketches made beside gutters, garden beds gone to seed, and countertops salvaged from kitchens with views into thistle kingdoms. They are not museum pieces; they are field companions, annotated with the kind of memory that comes from walking the same block in three different seasons. Where words falter, a line of ink remembers the angle of a leaf, the curve of a seedpod, the way a fungus wears its weather.

If the world around us has grown strange, it has also grown legible in new ways. Wind speaks in the language of carrying and clearing. Distance takes on the weight of kindness. The small rituals—setting a jar where sun can find it, noting the hour the birds fall quiet, marking a doorframe with a piece of charcoal—arrive like beads on a thread, reminding us that craft and care are old companions. Nothing here is promised. Everything here is practiced.

You will meet companions in these pages—some human, some more rooted. There’s the neighbor who traded stories for handfuls of greens from the shaded side yard; the

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fox whose routes taught me safer paths than any map; the patch of milkweed that offered silk and solace in equal measure. We traveled together in a loose braid, each of us lending the other a way to go on. What we built—meals, shelters, a quiet code of gestures—felt fragile, yet it held.

Call this an almanac if you like, but remember that almanacs are not commandments; they are conversations with the seasons. What I offer is a set of remembered mornings and carefully kept evenings, a chorus of observations tuned to the key of survival and grace. May these notes help you read the weeds that rise through cracked concrete, hear the low music of jars on a shelf, and find, even now, a steady rhythm to walk by.

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CHAPTER ONE: After the Static

The last clear broadcast I remember came through on a Tuesday. I know it was a Tuesday because I had been pressing a sprig of wild fennel between two sheets of acid-free paper and the late-afternoon light was doing that thing it does in September—splitting through the persimmon tree outside the herbarium window and throwing copper coins across the floor. The radio on the desk had been murmuring all day, a low-voiced companion no one else seemed to visit. It was giving the weather for the coastal corridor, something about an inversion layer, and I remember thinking how ordinary it all was, how deeply unremarkable a weather report can sound when you still believe there will be a tomorrow that needs one.

Then the static came. Not the usual hiss of a weak signal or the warm crackle of distance. This was different—a thick, rolling interference, like someone dragging a comb across a washboard made of thunder. The voice of the meteorologist stuttered, broke apart, and dissolved into something that sounded less like noise and more like a living thing breathing into the speaker. I reached for the dial. Turned it left. Turned it right. Every frequency had the same respiration, the same wet exhalation, as though the air itself had developed a throat.

I turned the radio off after forty minutes. I wish I had turned it on again sooner, or kept it on longer, or done something with the information instead of sitting at my desk and watching the shadows of the persimmon leaves tremble on the wall. But I was tired. I had spent the morning cataloguing a collection of Chenopodium album specimens—lamb's-quarters, one of the most reliable wild greens you will ever meet, dependable as a cousin who never cancels plans—and my eyes were dry and my back ached and the strange broadcast felt like someone else's problem. I went home. I made tea. I did not sleep well.

By Thursday, no one was answering their phones.

I want to be honest about something before we go further. The years I spent as a field botanist did not prepare me for the world that came after. I had studied plant communities, mapped distributions, learned the quiet diplomacy of negotiating access through private land with a clipboard and a polite demeanor. I could tell you the difference between *Viola sororia* and *Viola palmata* by the shape of the basal lobes alone. I had held dried specimens up to the light and read the geography of a landscape in the curl of a leaf margin. But none of that—not the Latin, not the field guides, not the patient hours at the herbarium microscope—taught me how to move through a suburb where the living had learned to stay indoors and the dead had begun to walk the dog-walking paths with a terrible, lurching purpose.

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The change happened in stages, the way most collapses do if you are paying attention. The first stage was silence. Not the peaceful silence of a Sunday morning or the deep hush of snowfall, but a watchful, electrical silence—the kind that makes the hair on your arms stand up because it is the sound of a world holding its breath. Birds stopped calling. Dogs went quiet. The background hum of refrigerators and air conditioners and distant highways simply ceased, and what remained was a void so loud it pressed against your eardrums.

The second stage was the smell. I noticed it first on Friday, a faint sweetness drifting from the direction of the elementary school, like overripe peaches left too long in a paper bag. By Saturday the sweetness had deepened into something sour and metallic, and the wind, when it moved at all, carried it in lazy spirals down every street on the block. The third stage was sight. I will not dress this up. People changed. The transformation was not uniform—some moved quickly, within hours, while others seemed to resist for a day or more before the light behind their eyes went out like a candle snuffed by a draft. But the end result was the same: movement without intention, hunger without negotiation, a shuffling persistence that ignored fences, weather, and the ordinary boundaries that kept the living world organized.

I closed the herbarium on Saturday afternoon. I locked the door, pocketed the key, and told myself I would come back when things settled. I have not been back since. That key is still in my pocket, worn smooth by the friction of months of walking, and sometimes I take it out at night by firelight and turn it over in my fingers as though it might remind me of something useful. What it reminds me of is the person I used to be—the one who believed that the most important work in the world was giving a plant a name.

The first real lesson I learned had nothing to do with the dead and everything to do with chickweed.

It was the second week after the collapse. I had barricaded myself inside my rented bungalow on Mariposa Drive and was surviving on canned beans, stale crackers, and the half-bottle of cabernet sauvignon I had been saving for no particular occasion. The wine went first—not in celebration, but in desperation, one nervous pour after another until the bottle was empty and my resolve felt emptier. The beans lasted longer, but I could feel my body beginning to complain, a slow and insistent low hum of deficiency that started in my gums and settled into my knees. I needed vitamins. I needed greens. I needed something that had not been sealed in a factory and stacked in a fluorescent-lit aisle.

The backyard was small—maybe twenty by thirty feet—with a sagging chain-link fence and a patch of lawn that the previous tenant had tried, and failed, to grow into a vegetable garden. Raised beds, made from cinder blocks, sat half-filled with soil that

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had gone to clay. I had assumed the garden was a monument to good intentions. I was wrong. When I knelt down and looked closely, really looked for the first time in months, I saw life everywhere. Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) was growing in dense, bright mats along the southern wall of the house, its small white flowers open despite everything. Dandelions had colonized the raised beds with the confidence of settlers arriving at unclaimed land. A sprawling nasturtium vine had escaped from a neighbor's yard and was creeping along the fence line, its orange flowers still startlingly vivid against the grey wire.

I pulled a handful of chickweed and ate it raw. It was tender, mild, almost buttery, with a faint mineral finish that told me the soil here was decent. I ate a second handful, then a third, and for the first time in days I felt something loosen in my chest—not relief exactly, but recognition. I had been trained for this. I had spent years studying the plants that grow in disturbed soil, the species that thrive in the margins, the quiet green persistence of things that are never truly planted. I had just never thought of myself as the kind of person who would need that training to stay alive.

That first week of foraging taught me three rules I have followed ever since.

The first rule is: never eat anything you cannot identify with absolute certainty. This sounds simple, but hunger is a persuasive editor. When your stomach has been empty for long enough, every green leaf starts to look like a meal, and every root starts to look like salvation. I have seen people eat things that would make a field guide weep—ornamental berries sprayed with pesticide, mushrooms growing from contaminated mulch, leaves coated in herbicide that gleamed with a telltale oily sheen. The dead walking the streets is only the most obvious danger. The subtler threats are chemical, botanical, and cumulative. A misidentified plant will not kill you as dramatically as a bite from one of the changed, but it can shut your kidneys down or send your nervous system into chaos, and in this world, a trip to the emergency room is not an option. Learn the plants. Cross-reference. Taste only after you have confirmed, and even then, begin with a tiny nibble and wait a full day before eating a proper portion.

I keep a mental checklist for every new plant I consider eating. Does it match the description in my memory exactly—leaf shape, growth habit, flower structure, root type? Does it grow in a location that has not been sprayed or contaminated? How does it smell when crushed? Does it have any look-alikes, and if so, what is the single most reliable feature that distinguishes the safe plant from the dangerous one? These questions have become second nature now, a kind of internal liturgy I recite every time I kneel beside something green and uncertain.

The second rule is: pay attention to where you are. Contamination is invisible and long-lived. The suburbs where I forage were once maintained with a cocktail of herbicides, fungicides, and grub-control chemicals that the homeowners applied with the same

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casual regularity as mowing the lawn. Even now, six months or a year or however many seasons have passed, those residues linger in the soil, absorbed into root systems and bound into the cellular tissue of plants that grew in treated ground. I avoid anything growing within fifteen feet of a house foundation, because that is where the heaviest applications tended to concentrate. I avoid the soil near old garages and sheds where motor oil and antifreeze may have pooled. I favor the margins—the fence lines, the drainage ditches, the overgrown easements where the spraying never quite reached, because the landscaper was lazy or the terrain made it inconvenient.

The third rule is: take only what you need, and never strip a patch completely. This is not sentimentality. It is strategy. A foraging site that has been over-harvested is a foraging site that will not be there next week, and next week is the only timeline that matters anymore. I pinch leaves from chickweed rather than uprooting the whole plant, leaving the roots to regenerate. I take a third of the dandelion rosettes from any given area and move on. I have watched people tear through a stand of wild allium like locusts, and I have watched them return three days later to find nothing but torn earth and the faint, defeated stench of crushed bulbs. Restraint is not a virtue in this world. It is a survival skill.

By the end of that second week, my body had begun to recalibrate. The gums stopped bleeding. The ache in my knees quieted to a dull hum. I found that I could walk farther without tiring, that my vision sharpened in the low light of early morning, and that my hands—always cold, always stiff in the old days—had developed a steady warmth that surprised me when I noticed it one morning while pulling chickweed from the raised bed. I was not thriving. But I was no longer merely waiting to run out of food.

It was during this period that I started the almanac. I had found a half-used notebook in the junk drawer of the kitchen—a spiral-bound thing with a cracked cover and pages that were more blank than written. I began making notes: what I had eaten, where I had found it, how it tasted, what effects I noticed. I sketched the plants in ballpoint pen, badly at first, with the self-conscious lines of someone who had not drawn anything since a college elective. But the act of drawing forced me to see more carefully—the asymmetry of a chickweed petal, the way a dandelion's leaves serrated outward like the teeth of a miniature saw, the precise angle at which a nasturtium leaf met its stem. Drawing was not decoration. It was a second act of identification, a way of burning the plant's shape into memory so that I might recognize it again in poor light, at a distance, or in the grip of hunger when my judgment might otherwise falter.

The almanac grew from there. I started carrying the notebook with me on every foraging trip, adding entries as I explored new blocks, new yards, new microclimates formed by the particular geometry of fences and overhangs and abandoned cars. I began to think of it less as a journal and more as a map—a living record of what the suburban landscape could still offer to someone willing to look.

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Let me say a word about the changed, because you cannot talk about foraging in this world without talking about them, and I refuse to pretend otherwise. They are everywhere. They were everywhere within the first week, and they have not gone away. Some of the early theories—that they were sick, that it was a pathogen we could treat, that they would simply starve and stop—have all proven useless. They do get weaker over time. They do slow down. But they do not stop. They persist with the same blind tenacity as crabgrass pushing through asphalt, and dealing with them has become one of the unglamorous daily facts of life, like finding clean water or keeping a fire going.

I will have more to say about protocols in later chapters. For now, suffice it to say that the core principle is distance. You do not engage. You do not shout to test whether a figure at the end of a street is still one of the living. You do not approach an overturned car to check for survivors if the figure slumped at the wheel is moving. The infection—if that is what it is—has made its host aggressive to sound and drawn to movement. Staying still and staying quiet are your first defenses. Moving softly, stepping on yielding surfaces rather than hard pavement, traveling with the wind at your back so that your scent carries away from rather than toward them—these are habits that become as natural as breathing, given enough practice.

I learned this the hard way, of course. On my third night in the bungalow, I opened the back door to step into the yard and fill my water bucket from the spigot. The motion of the door swinging on its hinges was a gunshot in the silence. Three figures turned from the sidewalk, their heads snapping toward me with a speed that seemed impossible for joints so stiff, and I saw their mouths open—not screaming, but breathing, pulling air through ruined throats in a sound like a bellows dragging across gravel. I dropped to my knees, flattened myself against the wall of the house, and did not breathe for what felt like a very long time but was probably less than two minutes. They shambled closer, circled, found nothing, and moved on. I filled my water bucket the next morning, at dawn, with the door secured behind me and a kitchen knife in my belt.

The knife was not for the changed. You cannot fight numbers with a blade. It was for cutting plants, opening cans, and reminding myself that I still had agency over something, even if that something was only tin and steel.

By the third week, I had expanded my foraging radius to include the houses on either side of mine and the empty lot at the end of the cul-de-sac. The neighborhood was a study in contrasts. Some yards had been meticulously maintained right up until the end—green lawns edged with uniform borders, ornamental shrubs trimmed into rounded shapes that now sagged with neglect. Others had already begun their slow surrender to entropy, the grass gone to seed, the hedgerows thickening into walls of tangled growth.

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The manicured yards were surprisingly barren. The pursuit of a perfect lawn had, over decades, created soil that was dense, chemically saturated, and hostile to anything that had not been specifically planted there. There were a few useful species—white clover in the shadier patches, the occasional volunteer tomato or squash that had sprung from a seed carried by a bird or a child's careless hand—but the pickings were thin. The neglected yards were another matter entirely. Here, where the sprays had stopped and the soil had been given permission to breathe, the diversity was almost startling. Henbit and purple deadnettle crowded the fence lines. Clover spread in dense mats over what had once been bare earth. Grasses had gone to seed, their heads nodding like weary travelers. In one yard, a pear tree that had been planted as an ornamental had fruited with a reckless abundance, its branches heavy with small, hard fruit that the owner had never thought to harvest.

I ate well that third week. I ate chickweed and dandelion greens, young clover leaves before the flowers opened, nasturtium flowers and leaves that had a peppery bite that cleared the sinuses. I found a patch of wood sorrel growing in the shade of a forsythia bush whose yellow flowers had long since browned and fallen, and I ate it cautiously, knowing that its oxalic acid content could cause problems in quantity. I found a stand of garlic mustard along the drainage ditch that bordered the subdivision and pulled a grocery bag's worth, its heart-shaped leaves and clean, sharp scent unmistakable. I cooked it in the microwave with a splash of water and the last of the olive oil and ate it standing over the kitchen sink, and it was the best meal I had had since the world changed.

Not all discoveries were successes. On my fifth trip to the empty lot, I found a cluster of what I thought were young burdock plants, their broad, wavy leaves familiar from field guides. I was about to dig the roots—burdock root is excellent roasted or simmered into a tea—when I noticed that the leaves were just slightly too glossy, the veining pattern just slightly off. I pulled one up and broke the stem. The interior was fibrous and pale, nothing like the dense, creamy-white root of true burdock. I had nearly made a mistake. A closer look revealed that I had been about to eat a young dogbane, a plant whose milky sap contains cardiac glycosides capable of stopping a heart with a certainty that the changed never could. I spat out the taste I had allowed on my tongue—a bitter, astringent thing that lingered for hours—and marked the patch with a pile of stones so I would not make the same error twice.

Humility, I have learned, is not a feeling. It is a practice. It is the willingness to say *I do not know* in a world that will punish you for pretending otherwise.

By the fourth week, I had developed a routine. I rose before dawn, checked the barricades, and spent the first hour in silence, listening. The early morning was the safest time. The changed were at their least active then, moving slowly if they moved at all, drawn to whatever dim stimulus occupied their vacant hours. I used this window

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to walk my routes, notebook in hand, checking on known patches and scouting for new ones. I noted the angle of the light, the direction of the wind, any unusual sounds or smells that might indicate a shift in the patterns of movement outside my perimeter.

After the morning walk, I would return to the bungalow and eat. Then I would spend the midday hours—the hottest and the most dangerous, when the changed sometimes became more agitated, as though heat stirred something residual in whatever machinery still turned inside them—working indoors. I organized my notes, pressed plant samples between the pages of the notebook using whatever heavy books I could find, and planned the next day's route. In the late afternoon, when the light softened and the temperature dropped, I would venture out again for a shorter reconnaissance, returning before dark to secure the doors and listen to the silence settle in around the house like snow.

The routine was not glamorous. It would not make for exciting storytelling if this were a story being told rather than an almanac being kept. But routine is the scaffolding on which survival hangs. Without it, you drift. You stop noticing. You forget to check the barricade, or you sleep through the dawn, or you reach for a plant without thinking, and any one of those failures can be the last.

I should mention the neighbor. Her name was Doreen, and she lived in the house directly to my south, the one with the sagging porch and the enormous fig tree that had split the driveway with its roots. I first saw her on a Tuesday morning—or what I judged to be a Tuesday; I had stopped keeping precise track of days, marking them instead by the position of the sun and the state of my supplies—when she stepped out of her side gate carrying a canvas bag and a hand trowel. She moved quickly, with the unself-conscious efficiency of someone who had been gardening for years, and she did not look at me until she was ten feet away. I froze, not from fear but from the shock of seeing another living person in motion with purpose.

She looked me over the way a botanist looks at an unfamiliar specimen—assessing, cataloguing, deciding. Then she nodded once, collected a handful of something green from the strip of earth between the sidewalk and the curb, and disappeared back through her gate.

It was two more days before I worked up the nerve to knock on her door. She opened it a crack—one of the good habits, the biosecurity habits, that people had already begun to adopt instinctively—and I saw that she had lined the interior threshold with a row of salt. A thin, unbroken line of coarse salt that I would later learn was one of the oldest and simplest deterrents for the changed, something about the mineral scent that caused them to hesitate, reroute, sometimes turn away entirely. It was not foolproof. Nothing was foolproof. But it was smart, and it told me something about the woman behind the door.

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Her name was Doreen. She was seventy-one years old. She had been a dental hygienist for forty years and an avid gardener for longer than that. She had survived the first weeks by staying inside, rationing canned food, and not making the mistake of assuming the silence meant safety. She had a small arsenal of hand tools arranged by her back door—a trowel, a pair of bypass pruners, a hori-hori knife, and a repurposed curtain rod that served as a reach-extender for pulling things that were too close to something else. She knew the name of every plant growing within a quarter mile of her house, not because she had memorized them from books but because she had lived alongside them for decades, watched them emerge each spring, fought or welcomed them as the situation demanded.

She became my first partner in foraging, and she was the one who said, on our second expedition together, that I should write everything down. "You think you will remember," she said, kneeling beside a patch of wild onion with her trowel angled carefully beneath the soil so as not to disturb the roots. "You think you will remember which ones are safe and which ones are not. You will not. Not after enough days, not after enough hunger. Write it now. Draw it now. Make it simple enough that you could read it in the dark."

I had already started the notebook, as it happened. But she was right about the principle, and I have followed it ever since. The almanac you hold is the granddaughter of that conversation, grown from a single pocket notebook into something larger, shaped by the miles I have walked and the things I have seen and the plants that have kept me alive.

Before we move on, a few notes on what this almanac is and what it is not. It is not a comprehensive guide to wild edibles. Whole libraries have been written on that subject, and in a functioning world, I would send you to those first. It is, instead, a record of what grows in the specific landscape I have traveled—the former suburbs of a mid-sized American city that I will not name, for reasons that will become clear—and what I have found to be reliable, season by season, in terms of edibility, yield, and safety. The plants I describe are common. They are not rare. They are the species that thrive in the margins of human habitation, the ones that have been growing in our yards and ditches and vacant lots long before we arrived and will continue to grow long after we have gone. You do not need to travel to a wilderness to find food. You need only to look at the ground beneath your feet with fresh eyes.

This almanac also covers the basics of preservation—the slow alchemy of fermentation, drying, salting, and pickling—because eating fresh greens in spring is a different problem than eating in winter, and the distance between those two problems is where ingenuity lives. And it covers biosecurity: the protocols for moving through a landscape that is no longer safe, the signs of infection to watch for in yourself and others, the small rituals of hygiene and caution that separate a forager from a

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casualty. These are not glamorous topics. They are the daily arithmetic of staying alive, and they deserve the same careful attention as any plant you might put in your mouth.

The notebook from that first month is still in my pack, its cover now water-stained and soft at the spine. I return to it sometimes, not for information—I have transferred and corrected those entries many times—but for the sense of the person who wrote it. Someone exhausted, cautious, cautiously hopeful, learning as they went. Someone who knelt in the dirt of a dead neighbor's backyard and found, in the modest rosette of a dandelion, proof that the world had not entirely ended.

I still forage that yard, by the way. Nobody's come for it. The dandelions come back every spring, bright and impossible, as if nothing had changed.

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