RETURN TO THE LANDSCAPE

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Then came the virus, and we were allowed to leave home only for the bare essentials.
Soon after, the wolves came down from the mountains.
Bears appeared too.
No one dared step outside anymore.
And then the high waters arrived.
Yes, the high water reached all the way to Nuoro.
Who would have thought!
It rose even higher still. The water reached our building, which stood on the upper side of the city.

Families began to move to the higher floors, taking over the apartments of those who had fled to the mountains. The water kept rising, and we all kept climbing upward. Space grew tight. We started dismantling the walls of the lower floors to reuse them above, leaving only the supporting columns. One floor less below, one more above – the building rose on increasingly fragile legs. We weren’t the only ones. All around, we could see other towers climbing upward, and we realized how tall we had become.

So my father told me, recalling the words of his own grandfather.

I never met my great-grandfather. He belonged to the last generation that had lived on the ground. Two generations were born and lived up there, surrounded by water. By the time I came along, the water had receded, yet no one thought of returning to the earth.

“There’s the sea, can you see it?” my father would whisper, pointing downward at a dark ribbon lying at the bottom of the valley. He said it softly, as though afraid to provoke the wrath of that water.

In truth, I couldn’t understand his fear. On the contrary, I longed to see the sea, and perhaps, while at it, to discover the world beyond.

“Why don’t we go down to the ground?” I once asked him, smiling mischievously as I did whenever I tried to coax him into a pillow fight on the big bed.

His face turned crimson.
“Are you insane?” he shouted. “Down there, you vanish. There are wolves, witches, and curses you can’t even imagine.”

I had never seen him so agitated.
“Besides, we’re fine up here,” he added in a calmer tone, as if trying to hide his earlier outburst. “Let’s not go looking for trouble.”

In the following days, he looked at me strangely, as if unable to grasp that I had even thought of such a thing. Did he think I was mad? Or was he simply worried? Word of my question spread quickly. From the next morning, my mother and the neighbors seized every opportunity to warn me about the dangers of the outside world.

Inside was the only acceptable dimension.
Outside was taboo.

Once, I tried talking about it with a classmate – I suppose I expected another child to react differently. Our school was on the top floor, the safest one, far from the earth and the water. Through the shutters, always half-closed, we could glimpse the curved silhouettes of the hills around us. I mentioned how wonderful it would be to play out there, pointing toward the sunlight breaking into rays behind a mountain. He screamed in terror. And as I tried to approach and calm him, he flailed his arms like windmills to keep me away. He never spoke to me again.

I learned to keep quiet.
Yet the more they hid the outside from us, the stronger my desire to know it grew.

Later, I became friends with another boy – Vittorio.
Our favorite game soon became exploring the tower. His eyes would light up each time we discovered something new. Even the smallest things thrilled us. It didn’t take long for us to become close friends.

The real turning point came when we joined Alice’s group. She was the wildest of us all. She said the earth was our mother – that we had been kidnapped as children and had to return to her. She said it with her already-large eyes wide open, as if her gaze had taken over the work of her voice. Or perhaps she meant: *judge with your own eyes, and stop believing what they tell you.*

Looking back now, I realize how much of our youth had been shaped by what was handed down to us, and how little by what we discovered ourselves.

With Alice began the great adventure.

During our explorations we discovered a hatch, on the floor of level seven – the lowest floor left.
It took us some effort to get inside that room, locked with chains by the building's security service.
But no one cared about that space, and once we managed to enter, it became our secret refuge.

At the center of the concrete floor lay a hatch, hinged on one side.
We lifted it – and beneath it, the void.
It took us time to get used to that sight. The first time, we slammed it shut instantly, terrified by the clear image of open space below.

We spent entire days lying on the cold concrete, feeling the chill seep through our clothes, our fingers cramped around the icy edge of the hatch. The view into the emptiness scared us – and yet, it drew us in. Our eyes lingered, mesmerized, on the outline of the building's projection on the ground. We could see the traces of walls and stairways from another time.

Alice said those first broken steps were our severed umbilical cords – that down there we would find the answers to all our questions.

Then, hesitantly, we'd raise our eyes to the space beyond. It took a while before we could let our gaze wander freely, without that knot in our stomachs that infinity gave us. We would close one hand into a fist, leave a tiny hole of light in the center, and hold it to our eye like a telescope. Through it we scanned the horizon, slowly shifting our view in search of geometric shapes that might betray a human origin. We thought we saw other towers, like ours in Nuoro, perhaps also inhabited. We imagined other worlds, and even battles to defend ourselves from those who might attack.

I remember one day Alice bursting into laughter.
"Why are you always thinking about wars?" she said. "If there really are people out there, then there must be kids too – kids like us, who want to fly out, to discover, to share stories… Instead of fighting, why don't we try to be the first to reach them?"

Vittorio and I looked at each other, bewildered. The woods and nature already scared us enough – let alone the thought of facing other beings, monsters, or madmen.

And as we gazed into the distance, I felt my hands tighten around the frame of the hatch, the fear condensing into sweat on my forehead. Sometimes I'd watch a drop of sweat leap into the void, and instinctively my eyes would follow it down. That's when my stomach clenched – as if that tiny drop were pulling all of me with it.

One evening, back home, my mother reminded me to wash my hands – everyone in the tower was obsessed with hygiene. She saw the deep marks on my fingers and asked what had happened. The moment I recognized the pattern of the hatch's edge, my mind flashed back to that yawning space below. For an instant, I thought my mother could see that abyss reflected in my eyes. I turned my face quickly. Had she discovered me? I froze. Somehow, my mouth invented an excuse: I had been holding the digital console all afternoon, gripping it too tightly while playing a new game. I raised my eyes and smiled faintly – and saw the tension melt from her face. She ruffled my hair and said cheerfully, "That's my boy. Keep playing with the digital – it helps you learn and grow."

That night in bed, I thought about the lie I had told. I didn't like lying, but it had been necessary. I wondered if one day I'd tell her the truth and laugh about it, as a ridiculous memory of the past.

We still had a long way to go before we could overcome our fears and free ourselves from the culture that had caged us for so long.

Vittorio, Alice, and I often talked about the shadow of our building cast on the ground – an unchanging shape, indifferent to the sun or the passing of days. That shadow, those few lines, were our past. But they were also our future – the bridge that could lead us to the surrounding world. I suppose they saw it that way too. Yet none of us had yet dared to speak of the actual descent. We kept dreaming.

Our imagination fed on itself. We conjured ideas, invented situations. We learned to create our own dreams. Until then, we had been told what to dream – mostly through that ever-present digital world around us. Now we were the ones imagining, identifying with the world beyond, playing with the infinite possibilities of life.

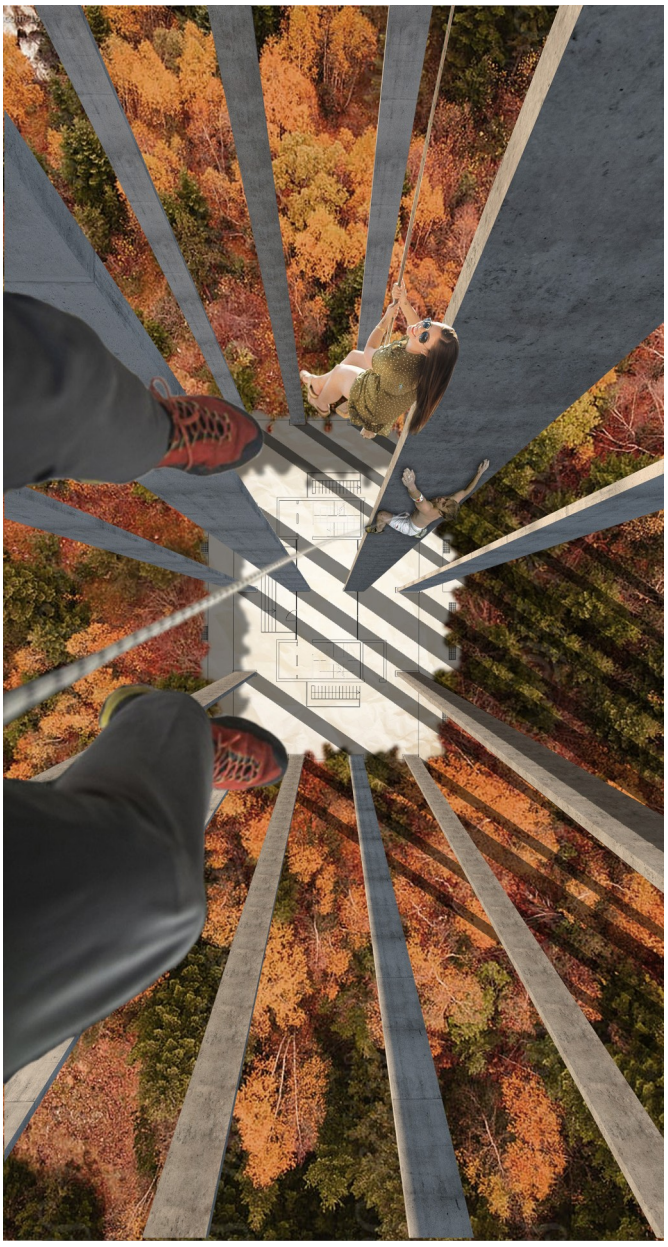
Those dreams prepared us for the great leap. Imagination helped us conquer the fear that tower life had instilled in us. It wasn't easy. We knew how little we understood, and that danger awaited below. Yet we had imagination on our side – and perhaps also an instinctive bond with the landscape, something the three generations in captivity hadn't yet entirely lost.

It was Vittorio who suggested the ropes.
We knew stairs – solid structures for climbing and descending – but building them

was unthinkable.
Rope, though – light, strong – all you needed was to hang and descend.
We just had to learn how to climb back up, if we didn't want to sever our link to home.

Alice, with her obsession for Mother Earth, said those ropes were umbilical cords, and that one day we would have to cut them. A silence followed. I loved discovery, but I couldn't yet imagine a life without my parents, my room, everything that meant home and safety.

For Vittorio and me, it was clear we had to be able to climb back.
So we made a training plan.
In the tower, sport meant little more than running up and down stairs. Our legs were strong, our arms weak. We started training in the stairwell, pulling ourselves up along the handrail. We told the neighbors it was a new game. They didn't like it, of course – in the tower, the only acceptable games were digital ones. So we trained during nap time to avoid attention. Slowly, we improved – especially Vittorio, the strongest. But climbing seven floors with our arms still seemed a distant goal.



Meanwhile, we kept meeting in our secret refuge, scanning every inch of the landscape. Sometimes we thought we saw human shapes. But we were never sure. Maybe animals?
Our longing to set foot on the ground grew stronger.

Alice urged us to go down anyway, even if our arms weren't ready to climb back. "Once we're there," she said, "we'll think of something. There'll be plenty of materials down below."

She was always fearless, always brimming with enthusiasm – while Vittorio and I stayed cautious.

But one day was different.

I remember that morning well – a spring day. Sunlight shimmered on the leaves below like a green sea. A warm breeze rose from beneath and slipped through the hatch. Against the chill of the concrete, that warmth sent tingles of pleasure through us.

From the horizon came sounds. Birdsong, perhaps? Others more rhythmic – "Could they be bells?" Vittorio whispered. Were there other children out there, somewhere beyond that horizon, just as Alice had imagined?

The world below looked bright, calm, gently warm. Everything invited us.
And we did not hold back.

Bursting with excitement, we quickly made our plan and rolled up our sleeves.

I went first. Alice tied one end of the rope around my waist and looped the other around a ceiling beam to slow the descent. Then, with Vittorio's help, she lowered me down. I was surprised not to feel terrified, as I had imagined so many times. The ground approached, the air grew warm on my skin. The descent intoxicated me. I closed my eyes and listened to my breath.

I touched the ground. I jumped – to test its solidity. My shoe left a mark in the soft earth. Nothing cold, nothing dead. Even the iron rod sticking out nearby was warm to the touch.

Alice and Vittorio's calls from above brought me back. I signaled "all OK" with a thumbs-up, then waved my arms in joy. I untied the rope – and when I saw it slither back upward, a flash of panic seized me. I was alone – maybe the only one on Earth – what if someone entered and sealed the hatch? But then a breeze of warm wind passed over me, and the dark thought vanished.

Alice came next. When she reached the ground, she burst out laughing wildly.
"We're free! We're free!" she shouted. She couldn't stand still – I couldn't even untie her rope.

Then Vittorio lowered the rest of the rope while I coiled it neatly on the ground. He tied it around his waist – I felt the tug – that was the signal. This time, Alice and I held the rope from below.

When Vittorio's feet finally touched the earth, all the tension of those years melted away – not just from that morning, but from all the years of dreaming and waiting. We started laughing, hugging, jumping.

That day marked the beginning of our new life – our first real life.
We had been raised to repeat rituals that weren't ours. Now we were living in a real landscape.

It wasn't always easy. We did face hardship and pain.
But I never once regretted that step.

The beauty of this outer world is indescribable – and I could never live without the joy, the pride, of being part of it.

In case we ever wished to return, we left the rope where it was, swaying in the wind.

Sometimes, passing through those valleys, we would scan the horizon – peering through the small hole in our fist, as we once had – searching for the building. And there it would appear again, our rope still hanging from the gray tower.

We would stand in silence – a kind of prayer for the unaware ones still inside – and then, inevitably, one of us would say:

"There's still our umbilical cord! Shall we go back in?"

And we would burst out laughing.