

THE
ALCHEMY
OF TIME



SEBASTIAN DE ASSIS

The Alchemy of Time

A Novel

Sebastian de Assis



Blooming World Books
Opening a World of Possibilities

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Prologue

Julie Marie was tired of hearing the litany of pseudo-optimistic commercialized concepts of growing old: successful aging, aging gracefully, anti-aging secrets, aging backwards, among numerous other contrived inspirational approaches that did not assuage her anxiety about facing the inevitable. It was exhausting to worry all the time about what is arguably the most challenging stage in human life.

“How is it possible to prevail against such a juggernaut that cannot be defeated? How can you surmount the relentless assaults of the passing of time when your only certitude is that old age and death await patiently at the end of the journey?” She asked the wise old man she met in her dreams.

“The answer is very simple,” he replied. “You can’t.”

“This is very depressing! I wish I had not bothered asking you,” she said vexed with his response.

“The only alternative to the perennial human dilemma of aging and death is to transmute your fears and anxieties into a courageous attitude that defeats, not the unconquerable adversary, but your own resistance to it,” he said attempting to offer her some hope.

“And how in the world can I replace my suffocating apprehension about aging and dying with an empowered attitude that makes me fearless?” She insisted on receiving a practical answer to her original question.

“The answer is equally simple,” he responded nonchalantly. “Through an alchemical Power Aging process.”

That night marks the beginning of Julie Marie’s mystical guided journey with *The Alchemist of Time*—until the end of her own time.

The Flow of Time



“Happy birthday to you!”

“This is the beginning of the most miserable phase of my life; the bumpy road leading to old age and death,” Julie Marie thought as a loud cheering erupted following the end of the birthday song that resonated through the small living-room of her one-bedroom apartment. Sitting around the table where a scrumptious frosty chocolate cake stood with fifty pink candles illuminating the room dimly, half-a-dozen of her girlfriends came over to celebrate the iconic turn to the half-century mark of living. Julie stared absent-mindedly at the swinging flames atop the double layered treat that her friends brought over to commemorate the special occasion.

“C’mon, girl, make a wish and blow the candles. In fact, you’re entitled to fifty!” One of the girlfriends shouted.

After a brief pause, Julie Marie blew out the candles with a dissimulated sigh carefully disguised under a disingenuous smile. Her heart was filled with birthday wishes, but her mind clouded her emotions with unbearable anxiety and fear of what lies ahead in the future. Now she was acutely aware of the wrinkles around her eyes, the gradually changing silvery layers in her hair, the sagging of the skin under her chin and neck, and her fine-looking complexion suddenly fading away from what once was an attractive youthful face. In her negative perception, turning 50-years-old was the beginning of what she deemed to be the countdown to the end of her life. The last decade seemed to have zoomed by so quickly and much had changed—and not for the better: three deaths of friends, two layoffs at work, and a divorce from a 20-year marriage had left her dispirited, disquieted, and disenchanted. She aged in silent angst, though she made great effort to conceal it from her friends and everyone else around her.

“It was a fantabulous evening, Julie,” one of the girlfriends remarked walking toward the door still holding a glass of champagne in her hand. “I wish this new decade in your life to be filled with as much fun as we had tonight.”

Suddenly it was quiet and lonely. After an evening of carousing, eating, and laughter, the open bottles of champagne and the strewn dirty dishes around the living-room were the only signs that the respite from the anguish of her birthday was over. Although her first impulse was to clean up the mess to avoid the visual reminder that she’d entered another 10-year stretch toward old age and death, it was almost midnight and she’d better get to bed, for at 6:00am sharp she would be awakened to the reality of daily living, again. And if her trepidations with the aging process were not distressful enough, she

absolutely deplored the repetitive and lackluster routine of her everyday life. Tormented by haunting financial insecurities and self-suffocating terror of old age, she unwittingly developed a very pessimistic outlook of the years ahead that she played *ad nauseum* in the shadowy screen of her mind's eye. If she were to write her negative image of the future into a script of a motion picture, the trailer would be summarized like this:

Acting like a stern colonel from the reserve army of labor demanding one's promptness for duty, the alarm-clock blasts its horns in her hard of hearing ears. Although the numbers on the digital clock are large, she reaches out for her spectacles on the bedside so she can see the bright red 6:00 as the first rays of morning pierces through the worn out curtains in the bedroom. Realizing that she had only five hours of sleep, she struggles against her aching joints to get out of bed and stumbles her way to the bathroom. After a quick cold shower that works like an elixir of temporary rejuvenation, she brews some coffee, drops a couple of sliced bread in the toaster, and walks back to the bedroom to get dressed. Fifteen minutes later, she is holding a thermos mug in one hand, peanut butter smeared toasts in the other, and rushing out the door toward the morning rush hour. Nearly an hour later, she's at the office sitting at her small desk squeezed between the soft wall of her cubicle and a large file cabinet where she'll stay put for the next eight hours, except for two 15-minute breaks and a half-hour lunch. Having endured the nuisance of crass coworkers and the unreasonable demands of her intolerable boss, she heads to the parking lot wondering how she managed to survive another stressful day. Stuck in traffic while listening to the depressing evening news on the radio, she daydreams of a time when she will be able to rest and enjoy whatever is left of her life. She finally enters the haven of peace she calls home, throws a TV dinner in the microwave oven that she'll eat in a hurry—and by herself—in order to get to bed early to make up for the insufficient sleep she had the night before. Lying in bed with her long gray hair sprawling through the pillow, she tries not to worry about making ends meet at the end of the month. Eventually, she falls asleep hoping she won't wake up until the colonel of the reserve army of labor wakes her up in the morning with its blaring horn—and the same dull routine will be reenacted until the yearned for weekend arrives with its gift of fleeting respite from daily misery.

After finishing her nightly toiletry before going to bed, Julie looked at herself in the mirror scrutinizing every single detail of her now officially 50-year-old face.

“This wrinkle seems to be getting deeper,” she mumbled while touching a line on her forehead and obsessing over her irrational and futile apprehension with aging. Turning her head sideways to examine her profile, she ran her fingers through her thick graying hair and pulled the skin under her chin and neck before releasing a mournful sigh of resignation. Giving in to the falsehoods promulgated by marketing campaigns of the multi-billion dollar cosmetic industry, she plastered her face with a slew of anti-aging products before retiring for the day.

She tucked herself in bed and stared at the ceiling empty-mindedly. This was her favorite time of the day; the time she longed for from the moment the symbolic loud colonel of the reserve army of labor prodded her out of bed with its obnoxious blast.

Besides its important physiological function, for her sleep was a sacred time in which life continued in mysterious fashion. And in spite of Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and all their intellectual peers’ attempts to solve the secrecy of sleep, she knew that the experience of dreaming remains an inscrutable realm where people spend almost a third of their earthly existence. Julie was aware of it, for since she was a child she’d been experiencing vivid dreams, some of which were even livelier than the life in her awake hours—like the Taoist master, Chuang Tzu, whose dream of being a butterfly was so realistic that when he woke up he wasn’t sure whether he was Chuang Tzu who dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming to be Chuang Tzu. If Julie were ever to dream of being a butterfly, she knew that valuable ideas, premonitions, and life lessons would be coming to her on its fluttering wings.

Mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion finally caught up with her. Without looking, she reached out to the switch of the bedside lamp when she knocked down the small bamboo frame on the nightstand. She slowly turned her head to straighten it out and looked at it with purpose for a long time before turning the light off. It read: “Sleep is the welcome death of each day’s life,” William Shakespeare.



As soon as the delta brainwaves took over Julie’s embattled mind, she drifted into a deep sleep. A dense fog enveloped her as she walked through a narrow alley where heavy foot traffic moved in the opposite direction. The farther she roamed along, the fog gradually dissipated and she began noticing the throng heading toward her at a very fast pace. They bumped and shoved her out of their way as if she were an inconvenient obstacle to their destination. She realized that she was the only one walking toward the end of the alley, while the masses of overly animated and artificially joyful mob cavorted in the direction where she was coming from. It looked like they were going to some sort of a Mardi Gras party, and their behavior and mannerisms led her to infer that they were either inebriated or utterly deluded. Every now

and then, some of the intoxicated transients would silently attempt through eye contact and gestures to persuade her to turn around and join the merry horde on the way out of the alley.

“Come back with us, Julie. This alley is no good,” a familiar face that resembled one of her girlfriends said grabbing her arm trying to drag her away from her lonely path. She untangled herself from the strong and yet friendly grip and marched onward while the woman shrugged and continued following the crowd.

Suddenly, it was quiet. Julie stopped and noticed that she was standing alone in the narrow cobblestone alley. The boisterous sounds of superficial amusement were gradually fading away behind her. On the left hand side of the sinuous pathway there was a signpost that read: “Dead End Alley.” Undaunted and determined to get to the end of it to find out where the crowd was rushing away from, she resumed walking toward the unknown with anticipation, anxiety, and a tinge of intimidation. When she finally reached the edge of the alley, she was surprised to notice that it led to a cul-de-sac where a small white house stood alone at the end. With trembling legs and sweaty palms, she took a deep breath and gingerly walked toward it. As she approached the door, she decided to take a peek inside through the large front window that looked into the living-room area before ringing the door’s bell. Paralyzed with horror, she held her head with both hands and belched from the bottom of her lungs in uncontrollable desperation at the frightening scene inside the house.

“Oh my God, this can’t be happening to me!”

Right next to the window there was a hospital bed where a very, very old bed-ridden Julie Marie lay in a fetus position. Her cavernous shrunk cheeks, toothless drooping mouth, and wide open fish eyes that did not blink were harbingers of an imminent death. The living-room, which was the only visible compartment in the house, was populated with several old folks moving about, some of whom looked and acted demented. As soon as they noticed Julie outside the window, they waved at her with friendly greeting smiles, but no one came to the door to invite her in. Although the window was closed, she could smell the fetid odor that came from inside. She dropped down to her knees sobbing incessantly as tears poured out of her eyes like a torrential rain of sorrow.

Suddenly, she felt a gentle touch on her right shoulder that terrified her and jolted her back up to her feet. She turned around and she was flabbergasted by the sight of a magnanimously imposing image of a tall old man whose emerald eyes shone like a pair of northern green stars that would guide her through the tempestuous sea of the aging process. The golden tunic that covered his body accentuated his broad shoulders exposing his strong arms that seemed more suited for a man decades younger. Despite his strong body and imposing physical presence, his radiant face revealed the crevasses that time carves in the fragile landscape of the human face. The long white beard that extended down to the midpoint between his chest and navel blended with his long snowy hair, which bestowed his appearance with a distinguished image of the personification of wisdom. He wore a few necklaces, some of gold others of wooden beads, and two bright brass bracelets, one on each wrist, that reflected light at the gentlest motion of his arms. On his head, a golden turban adorned by a blue stripe with ruby-like jewels

sewn onto it circled the head piece. He carried a long wooden staff with a large shining red stone on top that matched the ones around his turban. He looked like a wise mystical sorcerer.

“Why do you want to come visit this place? Is this the house of your dreams?” He asked Julie with a serene and yet stern voice that trebled her eardrums while his emerald gaze pierced through her startled brown eyes.

“Who...who are you?” she stammered with her mouth agape.

“Why do you want to come visit this place? Is this the house of your dreams?” He repeated ignoring her question until he received an answer to his.

“I don’t know how I ended up at this place. Please help me get out of here,” she pleaded staring at him in utter disbelief and amazement of such a magnanimous sight.

“You’re the only one who can get yourself away from this place, and the first step is to stop obsessing about it so much,” he said in a reproaching tone of voice. “Otherwise you might move into this house sooner than you think.”

“Who are you?” she insisted to find out. “This place was completely deserted when I got here. Everyone else was moving in the opposite direction. Where did you come from?”

He smiled and the dimples hidden in his beard-covered face revealed both their disguised existence and the tenderness of his soul.

“If you weren’t so troubled by your excessive anxieties and fears, you would have noticed the inconspicuous pathway that leads to my cabin in the woods; right before you entered the cul-de-sac at the edge of the Dead End Alley. This is what happens to those who don’t pay attention to the present moment; they miss out on discovering new paths that can take them to wholesome places. Instead, they end up on the footsteps of the house of despair.”

He turned around and started walking away. Julie watched him inquisitively without budging.

“Don’t you want to know who I am and where I come from?” He asked turning his head in her direction. “Then you must come with me to find out. I’ll tell you what you need to know on the way home.”

He resumed walking and she hurried to catch up with him.

They treaded side by side in silence toward the pathway at the entrance of the cul-de-sac that led to his realm of existence. The thumping of his shaft hitting the ground was the only sound punctuating their steps as they approached the almost imperceptible trail on the right hand side where the Dead End Alley intersected with the cul-de-sac. Julie followed him through the greenery trail wondering how in the world she didn’t notice it before. As she thought about it, the mysterious man paused and looked at her as though he had read her mind. They continued on the passageway flanked by majestic tall trees from where the sounds of abundant life resonated. Unusual chirping of exotic birds, screeching noises of monkeys, and cackling of unrecognizable creatures filled the air like a symphony performed by the orchestra of nature. A crystalline creek flowed along the path adding a humming of running water that soothed her nervous system as she recovered from the trauma she’d just experienced. The environment

was teeming with life all around her; a stark contrast with the dry and lifeless atmosphere of the place she was walking from. Without stopping or saying a word, the old man smiled noticing the impact that the vibrant ambiance was exerting on her.

“Wow, I feel so much better!” She exclaimed exhaling heavily. She wanted to ask him again who he was, but she had another question that was begging for clarification. “I hope you can explain to me why those superficially animated people were walking in the opposite direction of mine?”

He stopped and turned to face her before answering. “Like you in your awake hours, they don’t want to face the inevitable challenges that await all living beings at the end of their time. They delude themselves through all sorts of intoxications of the mind in order to avoid heading in the right and only direction toward the final destination of Life. Instead, they make the futile choice of moving against the inexorable laws of nature and living in denial of the inevitable. They are inebriated by the delusion of halting the aging process and avoiding Death, both of which are impossible to achieve.”

“Can’t blame them for avoiding that horrible house!” Julie said recalling the traumatizing experience she’d just endured. “Perhaps it’s a craven attitude; but for God sake, how would you muster the strength and courage to face such a terrible destination?”

“You’re right, it is a craven attitude that deprives them from discovering what you are about to find out, granted that you have as much courage to live as you have to die,” he said. “But you’re wrong in regards to the terrible destination.”

“Oh, please, I can tell that you’re an optimistic fellow, and seemingly with a great deal of knowledge to top it off; but come on, old age and death? That’s a horrible destination!” She exclaimed with conviction.

“So your fears and anxieties make you believe it,” he replied succinctly.

“No, my aching body and the mirror make me believe it,” she said in her characteristic stubborn temperament. “Listen, I know I have my issues with aging, but the truth about it is as undeniable as it is inevitable.”

“And yet, you chose not to turn around and join the crowd whose mirth was covered by the veil of illusion and fear. Instead, you decided to face the inevitable and undeniable truth,” he said. “And because of your decision, you are now walking on this nurturing path with me about to embark on a chronological alchemical journey in which you’ll learn how to turn aging into Power. As for the pseudo-jolly crowd you encountered walking in the opposite direction, they will run into the wall of reality and crash, for there is no way out of the Dead End Alley, regardless of the direction they take. Has it ever occurred to you that those who most fear to die are the ones who most fear to live? That by running away from Death they’re actually running away from Life?”

Julie was quiet and pensive. Perhaps the chronological alchemical journey he alluded to was nothing but learning to accept aging and death as integral components of life. She looked around marveling at the splendid surroundings and realized that it happened only after she came face-to-face with her fear of old age and death, both of which were ghastly represented inside that dreadful

house. After trudging through the uneven and hard cobblestone alley that led her to a terrifying experience, now she walked side-by-side to a wise mentor who was going to lead her to a new empowering way of living in order to face the gradual decline and inevitable demise of the individual human experience. Suddenly, it all made sense to her. The old man's immaculate trail was a symbolic representation of the path she needed to follow as he guided her steps through the road to Power Aging.

"We should get going, for we still have a long way to go," he said after pounding his shaft on the ground three times. "We don't have much time left today before the alarm clock awakes you demanding your servitude to your economic function duties."

"Who are you?" Julie reinstated her question to the enigmatic old man as soon as they resumed walking.

"Well, the answer to who I am and what I am called depends on who is asking the question," he said.

"What do you mean?" She asked with a furrowed brow.

"Some envision me as a sort of time keeper and they like to call me Father Time, which I find most puerile and unimaginative," he said with a giggle. "However, granted that the title of Father Time is applicable, then I'd have to introduce my perennial spouse with whom, by a decree of nature, we rule over the entire realm of Life."

Julie was surprised to hear that the old man had a wife; and apparently, a powerful one for that matter. "And what's your wife's name?"

"My loving wife's name is Mother Death, and together we are the sovereigns of the world."

"That sounds frightening, not to mention that's utterly absurd to think of death as a mother," Julie retorted showing her disappointment with a hint of indignation.

He looked deeply into her eye and the emerald light of his being twinkled like a lighthouse showing the first signs of guidance to the lost vessel of her mind adrift in a sea of confusion. He paused leaning on his staff before replying to what he considered to be a harebrained comment.

"Mother Death is the ultimate perennial mystery of Life. She poses the most dreadful fear of all to the human species. And sadly, She is the most misunderstood and unappreciated essential element of Creation, which always has a beginning and an end that leads to new beginnings," he said. "Traditional alchemists have expressed this paradox through the symbol of the *Ouroboros*, the snake that eats its own tail as a means of representing infinity or wholeness; like the endings that lead to new beginnings."

"This is all very interesting, but it doesn't validate your calling death a mother," Julie retorted with both her voice and eyebrow defiantly raised.

"But Death is a mother, indeed, for She gives birth to new conditions and circumstances. Even if you believe that nihilism is all that follows what people assume to be a fatalistic event, She still gives birth to something new, even if it is nothingness," he said while Julie looked at him as if he spoke hodgepodge. "Death is not a once in a lifetime occurrence, but She is always present and with you throughout your entire Life. In fact, Death happens every day and manifests Herself in manifold ways through the compulsory, continuous, and endless changes of Life: there are Death of moments, Death of good and

bad times, Death of phases in your Life, Death of jobs, Death of Love affairs, Death of friendships, and the list goes on continually. Every time something ends She is present, and something new always ensues. It is fear that deludes the human species in erroneously believing that Death is a final sentence imposed by a draconian judge or wrathful god, when in reality She is but a concatenation of short-lived events and phases of your Life. However, because She is shrouded in the mystery of the unknown; the not knowing what's going to happen next, She's feared and avoided, even though She always begets something new. In this sense, She is the mother of new beginnings, and the alchemist symbol of the *Ouroboros* is the quintessential representation of Her essence."

Julie looked more confused than before his explanation. She'd never thought of death in such a nonchalant manner; to the contrary, for her death was a dead serious business that ended the experience of living. She knew that her debilitating apprehension with the aging process went hand-in-hand with the horror of the expiration of time.

"Thus, Mother Death is the perpetual spouse of Father Time with whom She gives birth to both beginnings and endings," he continued. "And for that reason alone, She ought to be honored and accepted humbly by all mortals who live and die by Her rulings. I wish you'll embrace the Mother whenever She comes to embrace you."

Julie was lost in her thoughts while ruminating over what she could not understand, yet.

"But I don't like to be called Father Time," he blurted out interrupting her musings. "I am an alchemist; The Alchemist of Time."

Julie did not reply. She was still trying to make sense of what he'd just said about death as a mother of new beginnings. She kept walking next to him toward his cabin in the woods without saying a word. By the time they arrived and stepped inside his dwelling, she realized how absorbed in her thoughts she'd been since he broached that bizarre subject.

As soon as she entered the small and cozy one-room cabin, she was overcome by an indescribable sense of tranquility, as though invisible waves of serenity flowed through the air she breathed. Inside, there were large colorful pillows on top of a thick straw mat on the bamboo floor, a small writing desk on the corner with a matching chair, and bookshelves filled with leather hardcover books from floor to ceiling against three walls. On the opposite corner of the writing desk, there was a small woodstove with a brass kettle on it and several shelves above it with many herbs-filled glass containers of assorted shapes and sizes. But it was the glass wall facing the lush forest where a cascading waterfall highlighted the panoramic view that her eyes were fixated upon. It was a splendid sight that mesmerized her. However, it was the object on the top of the altar in front of the glass wall and the bird perching nearby that intrigued her senses the most. A tall and radiant crystal hourglass supported by a thick solid gold stand hijacked her attention from the breathtaking view outside. Inside the connecting dual bulbs of the hourglass, a scintillating amethyst-like fine sand trickled down uninterruptedly, though the bottom vessel never filled to capacity and neither did the top ended its continuous flow. Like the waterfall in the woods, that magnificent time keeping piece seemed to have a life of its own that flowed endlessly. Above

it, on the right hand side, a large pearly white owl perched on a golden rod with wide open eyes of the same purple color as the dripping sand in the magical hourglass. Julie was utterly entranced.

“Quite different from the sight inside the house in the Dead End Alley, isn’t it?” he remarked noticing her astonishment with the surroundings. “That house where I met you represents the compunctious state of mind you lived in; a place consumed by fear and anxiety with the inevitable end of Life. This cabin, on the other hand, symbolizes another possibility in which you can live the latter stages of your life. Of course, it doesn’t mean that there won’t be challenges as you age, for tribulations are present throughout a lifetime. But in the right state of mind, you don’t have to experience Death while you’re still alive.”

She looked around pivoting on her feet in a complete circle and stopped facing the glass wall, though her eyes were fixed on the mystifying hourglass. Then, she glanced over it and noticed the enchanting white owl staring at her with its dazzling kaleidoscopic purple eyes.

“The magic bird has become aware that you’ve crossed the threshold,” The Alchemist of Time said observing the owl’s fixated gaze at Julie. “This mighty numinous bird can see through the darkness of the human soul, as well as the secrets and omens of the future. She knows that you’re about to become an apprentice in the art of The Alchemy of Time in which pain and suffering can be transmuted into personal Power.”

Julie listened to his words but her eyes could not dodge the capturing clutch of the white owl’s penetrating eye contact. The purple color of the bird’s eyes constantly changed tonalities as the iris in the eyeballs rotated like a kaleidoscope that exerted a hypnotizing effect on her. She was in a trance; a dream within a dream. Suddenly, with a gentle glimpse of his eyes, the old man beckoned the bird as it flew over Julie’s head and landed on his right shoulder. Once she perched on her master’s collarbone, the owl closed her eyes and serenity enveloped her as though she’d fallen into deep meditation. It was only at that moment that Julie regained the sense of herself.

“Athena is my Power bird,” he said revealing the white owl’s name. “She symbolizes Wisdom, the ability to see things that are hidden in the dark, the ability to thrive in the realm of the unknown, among many other beneficial gifts of her magical powers. However, in the work of The Alchemy of Time, her most important function is to guide the initiates through the blurry cloud of the illusion of time until they overcome the fear of its finitude. This is the reason her eyes are the same color as the sand in the hourglass, for she can see the truth from the inside of the timepiece. Having learned the truth about the illusion of time and overcome the fear of it, now she can perch above the hourglass with confidence and unwavering equanimity.”

“What about the hourglass?” Julie inquired pointing at it. “It must have a symbolic meaning, too.”

The Alchemist of Time looked at the magnificent time keeping tool in silence before replying. “This enigmatic hourglass holds the simplicity of the secret of time. The ever-flowing purple sand, a color that symbolizes, among other things, magic, mystery, spirituality, the sub-conscious, and Power, does not keep track of time as you know it. Instead, it divulges the reality that time is as endless as it is an

illusion of the limited perception of the observer. In fact, in your realm of existence the science of quantum mechanics already has evinced this truth, as one of your most famous scientists by the name of Albert Einstein once said, 'the only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once.' But for me, on a very personal level, this portentous device is like an appendage of my own physical body."

Julie mulled over his words feeling lost in a time that apparently didn't even exist. Then, she turned her back to the glass wall and marveled at the three built-in floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with thick leather bound books.

"I can only surmise that these books hold some potent meaning of their own," she said running her fingers through the spine of the volumes until they suddenly stopped on a black cover book titled *The Alchemical Transformation of the Aging Process*.

"Of course, they do. Books are inherently powerful, especially the ones whose content are developed to empower the reader. But in terms of their symbolism in my magical cabin, they represent the knowledge that can be accumulated with the passing of time. Mind you, however, that this is not a general rule, for not everyone who ages becomes knowledgeable. In fact, age is often wasted on the old. But here in my library each book corresponds to a lifetime of learning, as well as a lesson for my peregrine pupils who come from the awake realm to learn about the magic of living. Incidentally, the one you just touched is the textbook for your educational journey with me, which you must diligently study as a condition of our Alchemical Agreement."

"Alchemical Agreement," she repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"The Life lessons you must learn to turn aging into Power before the expiration of your time on Earth," he said. "This is the reason you walked the entire length of the Dead End Alley, unwittingly searching for me while everyone else was moving in the opposite direction."

"Alchemical Agreement," she mumbled trying to make sense of it.

"It's time for you to go back now," he said looking outside and noticing the change in the orange hue of the western sky.

"Wait!" she interjected. "You never told me your name."

"My name is Khronos. I am the personification of time; The Alchemist of Time."

As soon as he finished uttering the last four words, the slumbering white owl named Athena opened her stunning purple eyes and took off from the perching shoulder of her master. With her spreading wide wings she flew right through the glass wall as if it were, like time, a thin veil of illusion.

Julie watched mesmerized as the mysterious bird disappeared into the bountiful forest beyond the majestic cascading waterfalls.



“Shit!” Julie cursed out loud noticing that the large red numbers on the digital alarm clock showed 6:35. “I must have hit the snooze button a couple of times. Damn, I’m going to be late.”

She stumbled out of bed and rushed to the bathroom to get ready for another customary dull day at work. Drowsy, yawning, and with her mind still befuddled by the strange dream she couldn’t quite recall, she splashed a handful of cold water in her face wondering about the mysterious realm of dreams when delta brainwaves take over the conscious mind. Although her memory was bereft of even a vague recollection of her dreaming experience, the emotions of whatever happened in her sleep were vividly present in her heart.

“Oh, lord!” She exhaled an air of despondency looking at herself in the mirror. The bogus anti-aging cosmetics didn’t seem to have made any difference in her appearance in the morning. The wrinkles around her eyes and the gradually deepening ravine in the landscape of her forehead progressed right on schedule. As part of her routine self-inspection in the mirror, she pulled the sagging skin on her neck, turned her head to both sides to inspect her profile, then released the habitual sigh of dejection as her disheveled silvery streaked hair drooped helplessly over her slim shoulders. At that stage in her life, the mirror had become the undeclared nemesis of her feminine self-esteem.

Gulping one last sip of coffee before dashing out the door, she realized she’d need to drop a couple of aspirins to mitigate the effects of the champagne drinking indulgence of the night before, otherwise the day would feel like, as if possible, even more of a boredom marathon—and with a headache to top it off. She didn’t want to start the first day of her fiftieth birthday in a negative disposition and have it determine the outlook of the decade ahead. After all, ten years is a long way to go; and likely, there would be another decade in which the challenges would be even more demanding of her fortitude. That morning, all she had to do was to overcome the hangover in order to make it through the day. But if she were to thrive in the years ahead, she’d have to get over her cynical attitude toward aging.

“Today the United Nations released a report on the far-reaching implications of an aging world population,” the news broadcast on the radio announced as Julie impatiently tapped her fingers on the steering wheel while stuck on a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam that ensured she’d be much later to work than anticipated. “The report’s startling conclusion is that the world is aging so quickly that most countries won’t be ready to support the growing number of the elderly population. According to the report, by the year 2050, for the first time in history, people over the age of 60 worldwide will outnumber children under the age of 15.”

“Good to know I’m not alone on this sinking demographic Titanic,” she mumbled as the traffic resumed moving at a snail pace. “I just wish I had a better psychological and financial life vest.”

“The U.N. report stressed that socioeconomic infrastructures will be significantly overcharged by what’s been termed as ‘the great gray tsunami’ heading the shores of societies,” the newscast continued. “Health care systems, pensions, economic safety nets, transformations in the job market caused by delaying retirement, either by choice or necessity, will certainly spark serious consequences to societies in a world population of two billion people over the age of 60 that is growing five times as quickly as the population as a whole. The experts assert that this is an unprecedented demographic challenge in human history with widespread socioeconomic implications.”

As she finally reached the exit out of the snarling highway traffic, Julie suddenly started worrying about her economic situation. Perhaps the segment on the news referring to “pensions, economic safety nets, and transformations in the job market caused by delaying retirement” reminded her of her precarious financial condition. She’d been through a rough monetary rollercoaster in the last decade from which she’d never recovered. After a costly divorce triggered by her ex-husband’s lies, betrayals, and megalomaniac tendencies to live an extravagant lifestyle they could not afford, she was left penniless. Her irresponsible spouse had duped her into believing that they were much better off than their finances balance sheet indicated. Thus, he lavishly squandered the childless couple’s life savings purchasing luxurious commodities far beyond their means. If that weren’t bad enough, his compulsive gambling habit—both at traditional casinos in Las Vegas and the more sophisticated speculative Wall Street stock market—expedited their concomitant economic and marital downfall.

To make matters worse, six months after her divorce, she was laid off from her 16-year job as a communications director for a multinational corporation that downsized and outsourced jobs in an effort to increase shareholders profits. It took the 45-year-old unemployed divorcee a year and a half to finally land another job as a receptionist at a prestigious hotel chain; a time lag that consumed most of her meager savings. However, barely a year later, there was a change in management and she was unceremoniously replaced by an attractive young blond woman. Later she found out that the new administration deemed the replacement necessary to enhance the company’s youthful image with the clientele, which exerted a devastating blow to her self-esteem that turned into an unhealthy obsession with aging.

Driven by economic necessity, the culturally refined and well-educated woman was compelled to take a receptionist job at a car dealership. Albeit the salary was the lowest she’d ever earned, she felt fortunate to have an income to pay her bills at a time of enduring economic recession and widespread financial markets uncertainties.

“I’ve got to stop listening to the news,” she grumped. “These news of collapsing social safety nets at this stage in my life are discordant sounds to my ears. They remind me that I’m doomed to work myself to and until death.”

Then, she realized that she’d better make an effort to stop fretting about the future and focus on the present, which meant hurrying up to work and not being too late, lest she might end up unemployed again.

“Good late morning, Julie Marie,” said George McLaughlin, the short, stout, and bald car salesman who carried a beer keg where once there was a human stomach. “Today is your lucky day, sweetie, because the boss is running late, too.”

She ignored his comment as she settled at her desk. Unfazed by her indifference, he leaned over and with his protruding belly landing on a paper tray, he spoke to her again almost in a whisper.

“And to make your lucky star shine even brighter, I wanna invite you out for dinner tonight.”

“How many times do I have to say no to you every time you ask me out?” She replied without looking at him while arranging her desk for another work day.

“C’mon, sweetie, I’m a car salesman. I don’t take no for an answer. You know that I’m gonna ask you out until the day you finally give in and say yes to me,” he said with a sarcastic smile in his unattractive pudgy face. “One day I’m gonna close this deal, if you know what I mean.”

Julie stopped what she was doing and gave him a not-so-friendly stare laden with rejection and devoid of verbal reply.

Albeit the most annoying and repugnant, George was not the only man who showed interest in her. In fact, in the past years a handful of interesting men had attempted to woo her attention. After all, in spite of her negative self-image as an aging woman, Julie was an attractive, charming, and intelligent lady whose latent sensuality had been buried under her personal traumas and anxieties about growing older. Although her slender figure and fine-looking facial traits were chiseled by the sharp unforgiving tool of time, the passionate sensual woman she was remained unscathed and buried inside of her. It was as though she had built a moat around the castle of her womanhood to ward off the attempts of daring knights. They should not dare to cross over to meet the lovely damsel who’d sequestered herself in the tower of the fortress of her battered female ego.

Julie spent most of the slow uneventful morning at work mulling over her life. Between legitimate concerns about her financial instability and assailing thoughts of a non-existent love life that she purposefully avoided since her taxing divorce, she wondered about her future. In the midst of her futile meandering thoughts about the unknown, a peculiar image of her life path emerged from the depth of her subconscious mind that caused her to shiver. Her brow contracted and her eyelids twitched as a blurred vision of her treading along a narrow foggy alley unexpectedly came to her mind. An uncanny feeling of familiarity struck her as though a suppressed memory wanted to reveal itself. She paused her fast-moving mind trying to trace the link of that sudden imaginative sensation with an actual experience, but the effort yielded no tangible results.

Occasionally the phone rang, and like the alarm clock that woke her up every morning, she was brought back to the reality of working at the reception desk of a car dealership; a far cry from the prestigious corporate job she held a few years earlier.

“Hello birthday girl,” Marilyn Watts, Julie’s closest girlfriend and confidant spoke on the phone. “How would you like to have dinner with me tonight at Bentley’s; my treat, of course. I just don’t feel

like the two bottles of Don Pérignon I brought to the party last night was enough of a birthday present for a good friend like you.”

“Oh, Marilyn, you’re always so thoughtful; and by golly you’re very much in tune with me. I’m definitely not feeling at my best and spending some time with you might be just what my shrink would recommend, if I could afford one.”

“I’m your shrink, my dear, and you have an appointment at Bentley’s at seven. See you then.”

The anticipation of getting together with her best friend made the day go by quickly. Marilyn was a vivacious sexagenarian woman whom Julie looked up to as a role model. A talented artist and well-traveled and educated lady with a contagious sense of humor, Marilyn had lived an extraordinary life of international travels, numerous love affairs, and an ongoing rewarding career as a playwright. Unlike Julie, she profited handsomely from two divorces, therefore preoccupation with money was definitely not one of her concerns, though she had numerous deep scars from the rough game of living. After all, nobody lives a long life without bearing the marks of the trials of time.

It was almost the end of the work day when flirtatious George stopped by the reception desk.

“Last chance of the day for a date, sweetie. What do you say?”

Without replying or even the usual courtesy of a pitiful half-smile, Julie grabbed her purse, picked up her coat, and exhaled a whimpering sound while walking away.

“I’ll try again tomorrow,” he yelled as she crossed the automatic door out onto the street.

