

# The Upside Down Mountain

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## Preface

Stories. They stalk us. And we stalk them. Bound by their spell and identified with them, they are friends or foes, signposting the way to joy or fear. As one version liberates, another imprisons. While we revel in the fictional tales around us, believing in their power, we often don't realise how life itself is a story we co-create.

I've always liked telling stories. As a child I'd spend hours briefing rows of dolls and furry animals about the twisting fortunes of everything that shaped my young world. Recounting everyday details helped me make sense of my experience. With my audience's mute encouragement, I discovered a parallel world real for being imagined: mythical landscapes and creatures, magical powers rewarding brave escapes from demonic captors, adventures on stormy seas in leaking boats. Storytelling opened up another dimension within myself, as alive as the physical world to which I belonged. But unlike the dense matter of my everyday reality, as a storyteller I could steer the outcomes with a tweak in vision, a shift in focus, a change to even a minor detail.

The freedom I felt in my imaginal realm did not extend to the more serious business of growing up and navigating my own real life drama. The world could be so frustratingly ordinary, so difficult, lonely and sad. Where my imaginary heroine could cleave the life she wanted through her own free will, I struggled to keep true to my own spirited nature. It was more comfortable to fit in, and adopt the dominant narrative of my peers, family and employers. Personal success was a measure of my self-worth. Purpose was in ascending the ladder of hopes and

dreams. I was invested in 'tomorrow', a horizon promising my arrival. Happiness could wait – I had to get somewhere first.

As a BBC journalist, I told stories for a living. It allowed privileged access into the lives of extraordinary people. As the years rolled on and the stories rolled out, I felt increasingly detached from the world I was hired to observe. Like a gawping goldfish inside a bowl, I would compare my own life to others, always wondering – what was remarkable about my own?

Aware of the restlessness gnawing at me, my solution was to take three career breaks to pursue my passion for climbing mountains. However, once I returned to my office routine, it was only a matter of months before that familiar feeling of unrest would set in. The glow of my physical achievements did not last. The changes I had experienced were external and fleeting – only a more decisive change could break an inner deadlock.

I decided to quit my BBC career to immerse in an outdoor life. That was the answer: chasing the seasons across hemispheres,

summitting peaks and then finding casual work to fund the next challenge. After eight months of moving from one high-altitude region to another, my dream crashed: I was not only physically burnt out, but had developed a fear of heights. Vertigo was an inseparable part of my climbing experience. An exhausting epiphany dawned: I had substituted the values of my office life at sea level to the snowy heights. One was a lot more comfortable than the other – but neither had yielded fulfilment or the illusive inner peace I craved. There were always more peaks to scale and challenging routes to tackle. No matter how my circumstances changed or wardrobe was weatherproofed, there was never a finishing line when the effort and struggle stopped.

I had an insatiable drive for more. Restlessness was like a twinge, lurking and persistent. As long as I was busy, I could ignore the tension my body was holding. When I stopped or slowed, it started up again. Even my spiritual practices could not quell my discontent. Just like climbing mountains, my experiences only provided short-lived breakthroughs before an urgency arose to get somewhere – anywhere but where I was. Fed up with the prevailing theme of discontent, which no manner of new projects could shift, I decided to live a new story. How could I be at peace in this moment, right now, whoever I was or wasn't being, and however things looked or felt? What would happen if I gave up the investment in outcome that kept me living for the future?

The Upside Down Mountain tells that story – from shifting my heady sights upwards, to my descent into the here and now; the immediacy of physical experience in all its sensuous intelligence. Guided by the inner compass of feeling, the book is an invitation, as I experience it, to go down into the body, into the melting pot of buried feeling, the very source of dis-ease. It is a story about facing the darkness of the unconscious and how time collapses when one is no longer constrained by the projected linearity of past and future.

If ascent is as much about ideals, projections, hopes and dreams, then the journey downwards, as I have lived it, is about bodily wisdom: the route into a crushing density of feelings I most want to avoid, that cry for attention when distraction stops. No human being can escape descent. Shock or trauma, grief or illness will plunge us into darkness and chaos at some point, whatever our resistance. But, descent can also be made consciously, through the journey of embodiment. As I mean it, embodiment unites the worlds of up and down – of possibility and actuality, of our evolved and animal natures – through physical experience. Both are integral to wholeness. To live vibrantly and powerfully means it is no longer enough to be cut off from the neck down. Conscious descent is to face the source

of discomfort, the denser instinctual nature exiled from our awareness through shame or fear. To descend consciously means choosing to make peace with those parts of ourselves. To avoid such an undertaking, or to 'grin and bear it', can prolong our suffering or make us ill. In descent, heartbreak becomes as much the key to freedom as bliss.

As a popular mythic map, the Hero's Journey, as conceived by Joseph Campbell, elevates life into adventure – externalising trials as tools for self-growth. The boon of existential challenge is brought back into the everyday world as medicine for its transformation.

The progression through life is represented horizontally, as a quest from one known point into the unknown. In contrast, the heroine's version of epic undertaking would be descent: verticality into the full-blooded physicality of being. Such a route leads down and in, rather than the hero's trajectory of up and out .

Neither maps are sourced in gender but in a fundamental difference in relating to life or its storytelling. If quests are the hero's language and expansion their gift, then it's the sensuous that guides a heroine's descent or contraction into her feeling nature. The hero navigates a kingdom represented as outside himself, whereas the heroine's palace is accessed through the gateway of her underworld. To be whole, or balanced, or fully self-realised, can never involve dominance of one way over another. There must be an inner marriage of polarities – the internal and external, or feminine and masculine – for freedom to be fully expressed in human form. And that dance, as I'm discovering, is a lifelong commitment.

As we master the story we tell about ourselves and our relationship to the world, so our creativity flourishes. It requires us to celebrate the paradox of our humanity – for all its perfect flaws. As conscious participators in life's unfolding, we can choose to embody our higher, most illumined states, while keeping true to our uniquely human selves, and how we experience reality.

With all the freedom and power of my childhood stories, *The Upside Down Mountain* is written as a timeless map, unbound from traditional chronology. Divided into four parts – South, West, North and East – each set in a unique place, these cardinal points mirror different aspects of my descent. Some played out unconsciously – as life happening to me, a passive recipient. At a more conscious level, I intended to explore with eyes wide open. And at other times, my descent was a co-creative embodiment, inviting life to happen through me. Along the way, you will be encountering guides who help me penetrate the layers of descent. They are guardians of thresholds within the collective psyche, carriers of wisdom who expanded my awareness and

illuminated the next step.

Inspired by the spirit of the 'Upside Down Mountain' itself, Mount Bugarach, I invite you to consider life as an unfolding story that shifts in its telling and to join me in a journey – one in which nothing is really as it is shown, its truth revealed through its experience. There is only one rule to its undertaking – the tale of descent is best felt than understood.

Mags MacKean, Bristol 2015

## **Introduction**

Disguised as a twinge, she has an answer for anyone who questions. For the most part she remains silent, hidden in the shadows – crowded out by decoys, dead ends and false doors. She might make herself known, as she did for me, when purpose and progress, mythologized as a stairway to heaven, no longer makes sense. I know her as Grandmother.

Buoyed by a lifetime of conditioning to want more, do more and be more, restlessness was my constant companion. It wasn't until I felt my way into it and listened hard enough to its wisdom that I discovered the nagging call of Grandmother from the hidden depths of my being.

There's nothing exclusive about our connection, no matter how intimate it can seem. Maybe you have felt Grandmother call to you too. Sometimes I feel her as a little wing, unfurling at my shoulder blades like a tickle or as a sudden impulse to sing. Silent stalker, tender and fierce, she has chased me all my life – long, long before I had any idea I was being trailed. Even when she raged as fierce deadly storms, I was not yet awake to her reminder – the reminder that she was waiting to call me back to the place before the beginning of time, when the story of 'me' began – home.

Grandmother has come as a tarantula – charging me in the jungle, among a throng of people. As guardian of the dreamtime, she assumed a plague of spidery crabs. As harbinger of death, she brings new life. With life, she demands death. It is a reciprocal deal, which will be struck with or without my agreement.

My first encounter with Grandmother in a human identity, so unlike her wilder or more abstract guises, came after a long, long journey, located nowhere with a postcode. The murky waters of my daydreams sparkled with an iridescent phosphorous from the pristine depths into which I had to dive. Descending through the dark density of bone-breaking stillness, I found myself in a

fathomless ocean, an unending dimension, the deepest to be found on Earth. Inside the apparently solid core, its hollow interior as vibrantly lit and abundant with life as anywhere miles above it, I was submersed deep within a dormant volcano.

I journeyed to Grandmother that first time with the help of a drumbeat. It propelled me down a tunnel, peaty and moist. My heart raced along as I felt myself pressed down deeper into suffocating darkness. A sudden downpour soon drowned out the rhythmic beats of my heart and the drum. My skin became irritated. How I longed to scratch it, rub away the fever burning through me despite the icy stabs of rain. The water overflowed until there was enough to float upon. I relaxed, weightless and adrift. Then, everything changed. The rain stopped and cheery birdsong filled the pale blue skies of an ordinary spring day. Not a cloud in sight.

A rich smell of damp grass drew me into an orchard teeming with rosy apples, a thatched cottage at one end. Grandmother was stooped beneath a tree, gathering apples to bake. Her white hair was in a bun, her dress too plain to recall. At first glance, her hands were strikingly large, but her eyes were the real giveaway – nothing was as it seemed. They did not belong to a fairy godmother, or a wise witch with a heart tender and expansive from eons of enduring the mixed fortunes of a very long life. No, the eyes that captured mine in the blue translucence of sunlit skies hinted of deep space, enveloping me in all the warmth of an Elysian garden, home-baked wholesomeness, a sanctuary of beehives and roses, blossom and robin-red-breasts.

Her eyes grew as I gazed into them, filling with a sinuous carpet of swallows, pulsing along as one winged bird. “You are the fledgling,” I heard her say in the unending stillness. “You are the little wing, the songbird who dreams to soar among the giants of the winged species. All my children are birds living for the only reason there can be.”

“And what reason is that?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“All the little birds are here to sing their hearts out and remember their wings.”

I felt my heart open, as I watched Grandmother’s eyes change again. They were now galaxies, holding the mysteries of the cosmos, radiant with starlight. A comet flashed at speed until it blazed as the raging, transformative power of fire.

“You’re wondering if you’re making me up! But I ask you to consider, what isn’t story? Is something less real for being imagined? I ask you, how can any physical thing hold more credibility than a dream, when everything – every thought, sensation and whim, and awareness of those things itself – arises within the same space – a space without borders, origin or destination, without beginning and end?”

The earth felt as if it was sliding away from under my feet. The hypnotic flow of her words was seeping through me, releasing me from anything solid. Wasn't everything Grandmother saying familiar, an echo of a distant memory?

"And what now?" I asked. "My life is only too real. But I have the strange feeling sometimes I'm not always in it – a spectator, wondering..."

She interrupted, mimicking my earnestness, "You mean wondering what on earth you are doing here?"

In my mind's eye, there was a giddy blur of movement, countless reinventions of the same old me in work and play; holding a microphone, dancing, cooking, passport controls, mountain ranges, a throng of people, of every creed and colour; the beautiful Earth. If time had run out to live its marvels how I would yearn to live more and more! And wasn't that the point – for all the everyday miracles, the countless reasons to be grateful, there was something not at peace – some...

"Make a friend with it," Grandmother's voice shattered my thoughts. "That very suffering, no manner of external love will heal. Your restlessness is your greatest ally, if you allow it to serve you."

"It is?"

"Yes. It is guiding you back to the beginnings of the beginnings – to a whole new you. It is the doorway to a quantum world, the unlimited possibility of the unknown. There is an opportunity, if you're willing to take it, to begin yourself anew, to recreate your life afresh."

"How?"

"Go to Mount Bugarach, the 'Upside Down Mountain'. The place of fire. Of purification. Feel your way downwards into its mystery, its very heart. Let it show its true nature – less of a place than a state of being."

It was couched as an invitation to explore the very source of turmoil I most wanted to avoid – a journey demanding courage and determination to go beyond anywhere ever imagined and beheld. I was warned that to become identified with any feelings would ensure a hellish experience in the descent ahead. To behold my prospects as just a climb up a mountain was no longer a ticket to anywhere. It would only prolong my misery. There was only one place peace could be found, if compass needles could point to it. The destination, she pointed out, was deep within the molten lava fields inside the belly of the not so dormant volcano.

"Bugarach," she said again, with the faintest trace of a wink.

"Don't get too drawn to its form. Like the bullseye, hold it within your sights as a blur, for a greater chance of making your mark. Then feel your way into its depths."

Where I had to go was not only to be reached, she trilled in playful understatement. It was to be brought back, on the great return, as a living memory. It had to merge with all other places held in time, as the remembered arrival it had become. This would be like a slow awakening from the deepest sleep. It was, she told me, the only medicine to soothe the thrum of the most persistent headache.

“You are going to Bugarach – beyond all that has ever been and will be. No one can take you there. It is a journey to be undertaken alone. This is your time to reinvent the story of who you are and have always known yourself to be.”

## **Part I**

### **South – Gateway of Fire**

#### **Chapter 1**

##### **Meeting Mount Bugarach**

After months of dreaming, days in the planning, my arrival at Mount Bugarach coincided with departing high pressure. The sunny morning had begun clouding over as the mountain loomed in the windscreen. Its striking faces rose from dense greenery in every direction, flattening into a gentle slope to the top. Hurling through the valley, there had been a few false starts: expecting it to appear after each sharp bend. “There she is!” Garth had declared, aware of my excitement. I clapped my hands.

A flurry of cars revved out of the muddy overflow at its base, as my friend swerved on to a bank of grass for an easy exit. A dark belt of cloud was inching closer – not the enticing blue skies of a ‘meant to be’ rendezvous with Bugarach I had so clearly imagined. Opening the door, I hesitated before straddling over a puddle to join Garth. Lean and tall, he had looked dwarfed squinting up at the well-worn route. He was chewing his glasses which made him sound as earnest as I was beginning to feel. “It’s impossible to get lost. But it is going to rain. A bit. Just stick to the path and you’ll be fine.” I hauled my kit out of the boot and made sure my waterproof gear was at the top. “There’ll be a place to pitch up near the summit,” he added. “You can’t see the flat bit I mean from here. Lots of room there.”

“Allow at least one hour ’til then, you said?”

“Possibly two with that weight.”

It took some effort to balance the pack, to close the clasp at my hips. It lightened it a little – but it was still heavy, and I was out of practice with hiking under load. I only had the basics: gear for sleeping, two more warm layers and waterproofs, and seven bottles of water. Fourteen litres to last me four days meant fourteen extra kilos to carry. There was no accessible source where I was going. This trip was my version of the Native American rite of passage, a Vision Quest. Traditionally, the solitary immersion in nature equipped boys with life-changing insights and perspectives to be integrated back home as they returned young men. Increasingly the practice bridged into the complex lives of Westerners of any age or sex: or burnt-out professionals like myself needing time out. I too was seeking inspiration. My life needed a kick-start, a fresh direction. Fasting, I knew, was powerful medicine. Going without water, as the

original rite held, was too extreme for me. And so the burden of carrying water was unavoidable. Every drop was unlikely to be forgotten in the trudge, clamber and scramble ahead.

I struggled to think of something to keep Garth with me a little longer. Another question eked out our goodbye, about the six-hour long journey he was facing to northern France. He had well-paid work crafting a metal staircase which would fund weeks of rustic living. A blacksmith and artist, Garth had created a simple belle vie in a village not far from Bugarach. A school friend had introduced us via email and he'd put me up – lucky to coincide with his last night at home. Even then, at the outset of my venture, I hankered for one more evening of fun, of good chat and laughter, helped along by Garth's dry humour, the bottle of wine and tasty fare, most of which he'd grown himself. It really was time to get going, Garth said finally, adding he wished he could come too – nothing like reviving in a blast of nature! Next time? He reminded me of the large iron key between two loose bricks beside the front door to his barn. I thought wistfully of his cat Tigger prowling and leaping between high beams, a stray that had arrived one rain-soaked night and never left.

Remembering my faded frayed waterproofs, I brushed aside the prospect of long wet hours ahead. It hadn't occurred to me to plan for weather more like winter than spring. "You could make day trips to Bugarach from the barn instead. Nothing wrong with that – I won't think anything less of you!" he smiled. I knew he really meant it. And my grateful refusal, in that moment of goodbye, had been just as sincere. Still, I felt a stab of uncertainty as I set off, wondering how long it might take to find a suitable campsite before heading on to the summit.

I was yearning to experience the unruly space outside the hedgerows of my everyday world – yet grim unease settled over me along the first gentle rise. Tonnes of mud churned by hiking boots and damp looked poised to slide, a viscous river of earth and stone. The path twisted through darkening tree line. Storm clouds gusted closer, lashing drizzle until my face stung. The upper mountain was swallowed whole, greyed as the verdant valleys. I lurched on up the squelching slope, gingerly edging along crustier, less slippery banks. Branches scraped against me and showered more water. A dull ache deep in my stomach was dread for the loneliness of my endeavour, and every other trial surely lying in wait. I paused to get breath.

The landscape looked agitated in the gusts of wind. Ripples of wind-whipped meadow could have been a churning lime-green sea. Not for much longer. Swirling fog was drifting over, limiting visibility in some places to a few metres. My intention to explore the famed corner of the east Pyrenees was losing any romance. It was often said Mount Bugarach was no ordinary mountain. The

high-energy magnetism of its limestone hulk had drawn many over the ages. It was a day tripper's ideal: accessible and remote. To my fresh senses, it was unfriendly and something else still – disconcertingly otherworldly. There was no one with whom to moan or commiserate. I had chosen to face this discomfort alone. My eagerness for a quest was growing limper by the moment. The key to Garth's barn flashed in my memory, a vivid taunt. With a sinking feeling, I moved on, overloaded and doubtful. A glimmer of trail opened up ahead. Rock walls glistened in one direction, charcoal fortresses in my need to find shelter; steep forest the other. Even wild flowers blooming improbably among boulders and silt made the grey flat light more gloomy and hostile. Everything was thwarting my efforts upwards. I stopped again. Shivering, my hands were too numb to release the waist buckle of my sodden backpack. It had become a dead weight. Barely three hundred metres above sea level, it was hard to believe it was late May! The wind was tearing through my dripping gear. Being higher, there was little lee. Bugarach flattened like a field before the last scramble to the summit, as Garth had said. I had little choice but to press on: dash to the top and scout out a campsite before the weather worsened. There had been nothing lower down that would qualify as a last resort: soggy meadows, dense woodland, and steep slope. I wrestled again with the buckle, eager for another warming layer. Mountains could alter in an eye-blink, but adapting as a fresh-faced visitor to their sudden transformation took longer. Time dragged in struggle. The start of a trip always required transition. My urban skin had to shed so that I could attune to the land's subtle intelligence. Gradually, I would become sensitive to sounds, movements and features, otherwise unnoticeable. So far there had been no such gentle exchange with Bugarach. I was being bludgeoned by its force; repelling my every plodding step, each one already a labour of will; nothing to distract me from the hammering cold and wet. After one last yank, the backpack dropped to the ground. Only then I realised just how drenched I was, my jacket apparently porous. It had been brand new when I crossed the whole range just south, some eight years before. It had weathered the seventy-two day adventure, skirting the borders of France and Spain. It had also summited peaks in Alaska, the Pacific Northwest, Argentina, Peru, Europe, New Zealand and India. In recent years, it had barely had an outing, wedged at the back of an airing cupboard. It hadn't occurred to me to check over it before heading out to South East France. Not for the first time, I was struck by my blind faith that everything would work out. My jacket and trousers, made of breathable fabric, allowing a dry exchange of sweat and air, were almost as wet inside as out.

Unless the weather cleared dramatically, there would be no chance to get dry.

How the wisdom of Commander Goldsmith an old history teacher was again being vindicated – who branded me in one school report, “an over-enthusiastic butterfly”. I had been eight. As my colourful CV since testified, I quickly tired of routine. My life continually felt like an exhausting chase of distractions. An unedited version would have to read: actress, courgette picker, broadcast journalist, traveller, kitchen hand, mountaineer, Amazonian shamanic apprentice, author, coach, energy healer, teacher and speaker. Multiple reinventions of the same old me. Chasing new experiences had become something of a vocation – since quitting my stable life as a BBC journalist, with all its fun, privileged access to people and places, the variety and well-paid rewards – my sea-level life, with its office dynamics and rungs to climb. I had wanted a different sort of ascension – one with the wind in my face, where my hands did real work and my limbs ached. Mountains promised that: endeavour stripped to the quest of a summit and safe descent back into civilised life. And so I climbed, scrambled and roamed, did odd jobs along the way – wherever the whim drove me, until my new outward-bound routine had become as repetitive and exhausting as the one I had escaped from. The values of work or leisure were the same. After dozens of high altitude trials, it was a relief to grasp I could live just as adventurously in dense concrete jungles – a short drive from the sea. I had virtually given up my mountaineering passion, determined to direct my energy inward – after all, I had reasoned, fed up with my nomadic lifestyle, wasn't life one great big mountain? So I embarked on a whole other journey, from silent retreats in the Himalayas, to the Amazon and its shamanic arts. After nine months of exploring the fear-filled realms within my busy mind, it was clear such efforts were clawing away at the very peace I sought. What was the answer now? The lonely freedom of having enough time and money to make self-driven choices could be just as dispiriting as the commute to work. I felt untethered with or without direction and its accountability. Until hearing of Mount Bugarach and my compulsion to visit it at Grandmother's prompt.

I opened my backpack. Inside were two more tops for warmth. Bedding. A torch. Penknife. A book and notepad. The water. At the very bottom, keeping true to the austerity fitting for a quest, was the lightest tent on the market – then a dubious credential in the stormy circumstances. Keen to lighten the load, I gulped some water back, surprised at my thirst. I looked at my watch. Less than two hours had passed since trudging off, in what had felt like hours of masochistic endurance. My natural optimism was overshadowed by a pragmatic assessment of my

options. I was reluctant to leave my pack, in case I found a good spot for the night higher up and had to scamper down and retrace my steps. Given how time was slipping by, I would have to make do with whatever I found.

The wind was getting stronger, unhindered by the valley's undulations. The upper mountain revealed itself before disappearing again. Dramatic serrations pierced the greyness, covered in green-blue mosaics of lichen thriving on the damp rocky spires. Mountain flowers, including mauve orchid and bursts of wild pinks, blues, yellows and whites, peeped between rocks resembling primitive faces. Ghostly faint voices carried in the wind, impossible to locate above or below. I pictured life slowing down far below in the valley. Venturing out was bound to be limited to essential travel and business. I was only feet away from cliffs and sheer falls. There was never room for complacency on a mountain, however small. I'd had many lucky breaks and chances over the years – learning how any minor error such as a slip in footing or navigation could be deadly. A crow cawed, shrill and throaty, startling me from its hidden perch. Its urgency sounded like impatience, a cue to get me moving.

Further along, the grassy plateau Garth had suggested for a campsite was too exposed. There was just enough space to pitch among clumps of gorse, affording reasonable shelter. On closer inspection, a sorry effort had been made to hide toilet roll, with soggy balls of the stuff wedged among rocks. Suitable options for the night ahead were running out. The trail snaked along rocky slabs to the summit. A flattish spot had been cleared of rocks as a rudimentary windshield, with off-putting bits of torn carton, a beer can and orange peel worn into the dirt. It was also right next to the path, too public to feel secure. Surely wild camping, I thought despairingly, meant a place without a human trace.

As I gained height, it was all too clear there was nowhere flat or sheltered enough to camp. I wondered whether Bugarach would seem as impenetrable if the sun was shining. In the buildup to coming, I'd imagined a gentle interplay with the mountain – paying homage after responding to its call. Nothing could have seemed less likely. I had yet to find my footing there. Perhaps this was why it was known as 'the Upside Down Mountain'.

Bugarach had its oldest rock at the top and youngest underneath – inspiring one theory that it flipped over from the impact of a meteorite. Or perhaps tectonic forces ruptured the Earth's crust to form the mountain, as layers of geology reshuffled, pushing the oldest to the top of the pack. In any event, the area was charged with undisputed natural power. Such was its electromagnetism, compasses could be wildly affected, causing havoc with navigation. Whatever lay ahead on that rain-blasted mountain, the experience was bound to reset my inner compass.

Already I had a sense of the unyielding mystery of Bugarach. Its distinctive flavour couldn't be compared to anywhere else. My tension hadn't let up for one moment. It felt like I was facing an initiation of sorts into the famed mountain's many aspects. It drew a spectrum of enthusiasts: the rambler, geologist, climber, caver, seeker, pilgrim, healer, romantic, UFO spotter, Magdalene worshipper, Cathar, conspiracy theorist, Ark of the Covenant quester, birdwatcher and botanist. From the moment I first read about Mount Bugarach, my imagination was captured: a mountain of distinctive geology and human appeal was going to have seams of hidden stories to be unearthed!

Until the Victorians, only an eye-blink ago in time's scale, the heights were believed to house creatures of darkness, such as dragons and otherworldly beings. They were places of haunt and exile, as well as celestial promise. Those more daring pioneers who took off to explore them were branded hero or fool, the mountain as much a gateway to hell's inferno as heaven's peace. Lust, envy, hate and the rest were said to scream in the purification of extreme heat. For a sinner or seeker, drawn to fire or height, the mountain meant transformation. Any opening into the Earth, however large or small, was a gateway to realms beyond death. And, I reminded myself, my feet were plodding over a mountain famed for its passages and caves, doorways to stories outside the everyday. Bugarach's apparent solidity, to swallow the bravado of legend, was anything but. No wonder it had been a documented place of pilgrimage for centuries, for adventurers into the unknown. And for me.

Rounding the final twist to the top, I was almost knocked flat. The tapping of hiking sticks was carried by the wind, before an elderly couple in woolly hats and with altimeters strapped to well-proofed jackets bounded down from the hidden summit. They looked as if they'd hiked all over the world in a long marriage, with strong bronzed faces, walking steadily without showing any surprise at seeing me.

"Le pic est la bas, juste la?" I asked for the sake of it, gesturing to the only possible summit point.

"Oui, continuez, juste la... deux minutes encore... attention du vent!"

Such exchanges were comforting in unlikely places, for all their ordinariness. I dumped the pack, mindful of the cliffs the other side of a second path descending a steeper route. A hump of rocks signalled the highest point. I touched it as a point of pilgrimage. As if in answer, the wind gusted at a force I could lean into with nearly all my weight. With nothing to see, everything white, and my body supported, I could almost forget I had one. Opening my arms wide, like a bird, I felt airborne. Without putting up some resistance, the wind could have blown me clean

off. The exposure was liberating, and wildness unchecked. There was no responsibility to anyone or anything except myself – flying on the peak of Bugarach!

Closing my eyes, I pictured the land hundreds of feet below, perforated with limestone caves and passages. “Whatever it is I’m really seeking,” I thought, “may I be open to discovery, and accept all that comes my way... always in my highest good,” I tagged on. Just in case. For life had always given me whatever I’d asked, even when I hadn’t knowingly asked.

I raced down to retrieve my gear, enjoying my levity and ease leaping between rocks. Back on the plateau, I ruled out staying there, after another thorough search for a site. Beyond it on steeper ground was an intriguing formation of rock. It made me think of a cave, the best possibility for dry rest. Only a slope of dense shrub requiring some crawling to get through separated me from perfect shelter – of that I was certain! Once again, I dropped the weight and twisted and crouched my way through the prickly undergrowth. I puffed up a narrow gully of scree, continually snarled by thorns. A sheer wall of rock became a handrail, shielding me from thin air the other side. I’d heard of hermits throughout the ages living in caves in Bugarach and halfexpected some bearded robed ghost to materialise.

After exhausting effort, I reached a flat area where the scree levelled off. There was no cave as I had imagined, only a nook between rocks, with a sheer drop one side. They were still high enough to nestle against and shield me from the wind and some rain. The spot was hidden too; an advantage from straying hikers. My positivity soon wore away during the arduous scramble back to my pack. Going down took as much persistence as going up. I couldn’t face that again. Given my fast ahead and how wet I already was, it would be a struggle to keep warm. I had to preserve my physical energy. It was only a matter of time, of holding out, I reasoned: there was the perfect campsite waiting to be discovered lower down. It had simply eluded me on the way up.

The path widened at the tree line, still too steep to camp. The fog clouds had turned the woods into a moist fairyland of moss, bracken, toadstools, guarded by giant boulders. I felt watched, imagining elves and goblins peering out from behind trees and hidden burrows. The path wound on, reaching the fields approaching the lower slopes. The decision of where to stay my first night was decided. There was nowhere else but the mud nearing the car park, or the other side of a fence, where the grass was long and land flat enough to guarantee soggy conditions. I scouted out the driest surface among some pine trees.

It was a challenge unearthing my camping gear from plastic liners without getting everything else wet. I regretted packing

my down sleeping bag – warmer and lighter than a synthetic one, but impossible to keep dry. The tent pitched, it took an age fumbling about getting everything organised inside. Everything felt damp – my spares, my bedding – and I hadn't even spent a full day on the mountain. The low front wasn't going to lift any time soon. There was no chance of drying out during the rest of my time on Bugarach.

I unravelled my mat and sleeping bag and tucked myself up. A choice of two sorry apples, the sole prospect of food before the fast began, preoccupied me next. Which one first – red or less red? A small puddle had gathered at my bent elbow. Water was seeping in from underneath. I sighed, too tired to swear, too despondent for any reaction more dynamic. Only an unanswerable question: What am I doing here?

My voices of rash and reason began to battle it out: well, this was the plan, and it was on track! If everyone on a vision quest gave up at the first sign of challenge, the rite of passage would never have outlasted thousands of years of evolutionary culture. The effort of optimism was too tiring. The train of a small spider roaming the damp floor reminded me of my own solitary vulnerability. What am I doing? Yes, what was I doing? I had no reason to choose such discomfort, and no motivation to prolong it – for it had been a long road since I left my London life, pension, Notting Hill flat and thriving network. “It was a new life, a fresh start, a dream,” I had explained rather smugly to those who labelled me brave. Well, it had taken a little longer and many social collisions later to work out lasting change could not be external. You could tweak the environment, climb some mountains, try out a new boyfriend, live in a new home, forsake the office life. You could move to the Amazon, train with shamans, reinvent yourself ad infinitum, flirt with different continents, places and people, never quite taking the plunge to commit to life as it is right now – every decision invested with a sense of tomorrow. You could set yourself up as the world's most inspired motivator or coach or change consultant – after all, a life committed to change, such as mine, knocked up some first-hand authority; publish a book, write some more, speak about it, meet audiences just as inspired to escape their life, and then meet some more. The airport could trigger the same rush as getting high – the ticket to a new horizon, the thrill of adventure, possibility, endless new influences. The merry-go-round of seasonal themes, the cycles, patterns, and déjà vu moments, the doomed love, broken dream, the mended, hopeful, eager heart, the hollow words of arrival, “I'm really sorted now, this is it!” Or false start: “This is my vocation – what I'm born to do!” There was always one common denominator, and that never changed. It followed me, pursued my every move a hungry shadow, no matter how

stuffed my suitcase, and how far flung or extreme my destination. For, time and again, being out ‘there’ and waking up to the only place there had ever been and would be – ‘here’ – could only mean that no matter how hard I climbed, danced, loved or laughed, cried and celebrated, meditated, quested, retreated, tranquillised, inquired, chanted, fasted and prayed, there really was – and always had been – and (if that was not exhausting enough to accept) there always would be... no-thing but me!

I peered out of the tent and took a deep breath to clear my mind. “Mount Bugarach,” I invoked silently. “I’m here to open up to whatever has pulled me to this unlikely place – given I don’t know what that is. I’ll stay all week if that’s what I need to do. But please – help me to know – just give me a sign!”

Almost at once, I sensed a reply.

“The way up is down.”

I closed my eyes again, intending verification. It was too easy to imagine what I most wanted to hear.

“To go up, you must go down...”

Clarity was a wonderful thing: when you knew you knew, and until you knew, you didn’t know. Suffering and sacrifice, which I had tasted, were not apparently a requisite to path finding or way-showing. A quest with the prospect of bed, dry, hot food – why not? I had to trust there was another design, another way...

Within minutes, the soaked tent was stuffed into my pack. I would have to relay my gear, not having the energy or will to reorganise everything to fit in as it did dry. Already 7pm. I smiled, remembering Bugarach’s ‘Upside Down’ nickname. The way up was down. Stomping back towards the valley, I relished my retreat to civilisation, wishing I could share the unlikely twist with Garth, who would surely be imagining me hunkered down with spirited discipline. Having explored with dogged persistence a life moving uphill, who was I not to investigate, consciously, the opposite direction? What did ‘down’ mean anyway that I hadn’t before experienced – and where could it lead? Surely, it was just a case of being open to signs, and following their very simple instructions.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Time of the New Age**

The next morning, between downpours, I had dashed to the one café open for business in Bugarach village. A weather report taped to its door was a blur of low-pressure squiggles and black drops. No change for the next few days: remaining cold, windy

and wet until after my departure. I headed for a table closest to a glowing stove in view of a woman heaping fresh produce on to platters for the delicatessen. Combs of honey, chopped herbs, cured meats and cheeses, simple and elegant, made me hanker for an early lunch. Customers streamed in, muttering disbelief as they shook off wet coats, conversations springing up as the windows steamed. The place had become a hub in the cheerlessness, time slowing to a soothing din of chatter, an espresso maker's throttled blasts and doorbell as someone came and went. Panpipes whistled from a speaker, sweet tinkles of the Andes in the foothills of France.

A nearby window framed an ongoing drama, with all its tension: would the sun triumph through thinning fog? Intermittent fringes of light, small rainbow spheres, boded well – until it darkened again and the manageress turned on more lights. Still, weather was a local peculiarity, varying from one valley to the next: perhaps my fast was only a temporary postponement, the mountain reappearing. My spirits lifted at the prospect of stepping foot on it again, until I remembered the mud bath around its base, no doubt thicker and more glutinous after another night and morning of rain. The prospect of finding a way through it arrested further skips of faith. I had ended up in the only place with beds open for business: an empty gîte overlooking its western flank. From the shelter of its porch, tantalising glimpses of the mountain's silhouette had come and gone. That was what I had to settle for of Mount Bugarach, touched up with some imagination. My patience was being tested. The mountain had clearly told me to go down: but did not say for how long. Surely I was not going to eat and sleep my way through the remaining days of this quest?

Voices trailed into the tussle of my hopes and disappointment. A man was recounting how the wind had made it impossible to summit Bugarach the day before. Sweeping gestures conveying its full force suggested a cyclone had engulfed Bugarach. Too dangerous – a suicide mission. Silence followed, which I felt compelled to interrupt – for there had been a few of us at the top – but for sure, I conceded, it had been hard work in that weight of wind. “Non, impossible! C’est le summit ce que je dige,” the man answered.

I had meant the summit, Monsieur. There was only one. It was true the wind was very strong. Still, it had been possible.

“Impossible, Madame,” he replied, more uncertainly that time, addressing the floor. Resuming, his voice was conciliatory, “Alors, voila! Vous avez la chance!”

If it had been luck, as he had said, enabling me to sample the mountain's unforgiving power, then I yearned for more of it. I ordered another coffee. A cyclist in soaked Lycra strode in and

huddled next to the stove. It was getting mustier with all the towels and jackets drying out over seats. The manageress was busying herself about a reclining chair draped in blankets. A woman promptly installed herself on it and stretched out. A hum started up as the chair vibrated and woman wobbled. Catching my eye, the manageress explained as she breezed past, “Crystals underneath. She’s being charged.” I could see her client was well prepared for whatever the bed was there to do. Already she had put on a blindfold, her mouth as wide open as someone passed out.

This was Bugarach – not just any postcard mountain village. When I had arrived bedraggled at the gîte the night before, the owner had told me it was indeed a special place drawing special people. It wasn’t always easy to live there either. There was a continual tension, she told me, an electromagnetism intensifying daily ups and downs. Until the age of satellite, even light aircraft were banned from within a certain radius to avoid disorientation in a mini Bermuda Triangle.

Although the region was rich in history with many ruined hilltop castles and trails of knights, battles, invading armies and religious sites, most who came to Bugarach village had the famed peak within their sights. All around it, abundant verdure sprung from underground grottos and passageways natural to limestone. Such labyrinths courted adventure as well as exploration of a more passive kind: speculation of parallel worlds and otherworldly beings inside them. It was rumoured there were caves waiting to be discovered – housing evidence of suppressed human history. Our anthropological lineage would be rewritten in such event, and the vested interest of those hiding the ‘real’ story of our evolution exposed.

A high-energy place was bound to inspire conjecture among more creative thinkers. I wasn’t at Bugarach to flirt with a radical view of the world – although its background of sensational claims certainly added spice to my venture. I wanted to forge a connection uniquely my own. But glancing over my notes, the bullet points seemed as random and fantastical as the rumoured conspiracies I dismissed. There were bare bones of leads to chase, as well as unsubstantiated material gleaned from the Internet.

“2012. Bugarach – link to Egypt. Eclipse – potential for what? Modern link? ... Essenes and Magdalene? Chalice mystery... Glastonbury/Avalon. My link to these?”

An unanswerable question threaded through all the others – would they weave together in my emerging story at Bugarach? Anything was possible. It was 2012 after all, the hyped date of Armageddon imprinted in the popular psyche. The area’s mystique was heightened among those who laid stock on the

approaching Winter Solstice, and even those who didn't. The interpretation of its foretold significance varied in outcome but not in impact: mass destruction for the planet at one end, or the death of outworn values and birth of a love-centred new era at the other. Ancient sites all over the world were seeing more visitors, as well as places charged in natural power, like Mount Bugarach.

Dreamers, seekers and new age prophesy followers had begun to besiege the village in recent years. There were increasing accounts of unexplainable lights emanating from the mountain. Theories to explain those and other strange sightings covered a spectrum of plausibility: from natural electromagnetic activity typical of its geology, to UFO landings and even alien beings waiting to live out the days of imminent apocalypse. Wherever one sided in relation to such hypotheses, sceptic or believer, popular curiosity about Bugarach wasn't new. There was something about the 'Upside Down Mountain' or 'Magic Mountain' as it was also known which had spawned legends throughout the ages – and somehow it had taken life within my own imagination as a muse of some kind for my own personal journey.

I thought about a bigger human story that threaded through epochs, cultures and continents – the tug of home and land. Pilgrims had crossed continents since ancient times, tracking a sacred chemistry uniting such sites. There was a universal lineage I could sense at places of power, such as Mount Bugarach – where the beliefs and myths of our ancestors to explain the world could be most keenly felt. At the time of Roman rule, a thriving Essene community had settled at Bugarach. They had emigrated from the Promised Land, possibly via Mount Sinai in Egypt, whose temples along the Nile would have offered rites and initiations. Some Essenes were known to have moved on to Britain's Druid centres of the Isle of Anglesey, or Mona as it was known, and Glastonbury, or Avalon, and Iona, the Emerald Isle, off Scotland's western coast. Those same places on the Essenes' trail lived vividly in my memory – Egypt in particular, having made three visits in one year to soak up its unending archaeological magic. So Bugarach, as far as its documented history suggested, was linked to Egypt and Glastonbury – two places that had most inspired in me a sense of the sacred.

Other histories woven into the mountain's fame required more faith: Jesus spending time there with his fellow Essenes as he journeyed on to Albion's shores; Mary Magdalene living out her time in one of the region's caves. The famous chapel of Rennes-le-Château nearby was dedicated to her and her legendary healing powers with water from the area's springs. Long after the invading Roman armies at the time of Jesus' life,

and suppression of pagan custom, the Cathars then had a part in the Languedoc region's romance. The Puritan peace-loving Christian sect was feared by the dominant Catholic hierarchy for their empowering teachings. Hounded by the French Inquisition, they were brutally killed in large numbers for heresy: refusing to believe in the Church's dogma, or worship their icons such as a cross. The Knights Templar blazed through the area on their quest for the grail. The ubiquitous ruined ramparts also spoke of powerful kingdoms and territories, rocky buttresses impenetrable to the invading armies of the Middle Ages. Secret societies were known to have spent time in the area, further romanticising legends of the Divine Feminine and her mysteries to be reclaimed. The Ark of the Covenant, carrying the Ten Commandments, was again linked to Mount Bugarach. Conspiracy theories argued the likelihood of it being hidden within the mountain's secret heart. Intriguing graffiti showing a stretcher bearing a chest, found etched on to cave walls, intensified the intrigue.

The discovery was made by 'Daniel Bettex', the one name scribbled among my notes. For more than thirty years, the Swiss explorer researched the Cathars' connection to the mountain and its caves. In 1997, on the eve of his last trip to the area, Bettex claimed to be within three days of making the ultimate discovery – the mystery of the Ark of the Covenant's whereabouts. No further word was ever heard from him again. His body was found without a clear cause of death. Was it a heart attack, or had he died of shock? His sudden and unexplained death fuelled speculation about Bugarach's hidden history. Even before Bettex's well-documented fascinations, the Nazis of the Third Reich were thought to have bored tunnels into the mountain. Whatever for? Even François Mitterrand's helicopter had once landed on the flat plateau close to the summit. Why? The French President had been recovering from heart surgery. Might the mountain's known vibrations and energy have been sought for healing? No one knew.

I too was caught up in Bugarach's metamorphosis from mystic mountain to popular attraction. The pessimistic forward planning of its Mayor had inspired world headlines – after alerting the army to protect his village from a deluge of visitors and suicide cults, in the countdown to the Winter Solstice six months on of 2012. There was a cross-cultural consensus of many traditional cultures foretelling an evolutionary leap for humanity – to extend far beyond the suggested impact of one specific day, December 21st 2012. The Maya, Zulu, Maori, Aborigine, Kogi, Zuni, Navaho, Hopi, Kahuna and Qu'ero were among the tribes to share with the world similar ancient wisdoms. For thousands of years an auspicious alignment of stars was forecast for the

Winter Solstice of the Northern Hemisphere: the Earth positioned directly beneath the heart of the Milky Way, known as the 'Great Cleft' or 'Rift'. For the ancients this symbolised a deeply feminine aspect, also called the Great Mother. The times were foreseen as an opportunity to transform our awareness as a species about our inseparability from the whole cosmos; we would awaken to the unity of nature and our inherent divinity as loving caretakers of all life. Over time, our wounds would heal as a collective, transforming our relationship to our feminine nature and Mother Nature herself. By rebalancing our values, we would remember the good of the whole over the senseless promotion of the self. War, destruction, harm to others and greed could no longer be the fallout of an overzealous patriarchal order.

As the prophecies foretold and leading visionaries agreed, it was a time for human beings everywhere to marry the feminine and masculine expressions of life within themselves, not indulge one over the other. The upheaval of governing structures and economies around the world fed into the credibility of the prophecies. 'Empowerment' was the language of change, the shift from outside authority to self-determination, and owning one's inner mastery. In the West, NGOs, volunteer and community interest groups were flourishing, courses for healing and self-inquiry no longer a minority interest. There was a revival of interest in the earth-based spirituality of our ancestors. Their values of reciprocity inherent to indigenous cultures chimed with many discontented with capitalism.

There was no evidence around Bugarach I had seen of a mass refuge from planetary wipeout. Few I had encountered looked on the wackier end of spiritual curiosity. The tourism of early summer was still some weeks away and Bugarach that May was an ordinary sleepy Pyrenean village. I looked away from my notes, the fug from the stove making me drowsy. Right then, I should have been somewhere on the mountain, sipping water, on the first morning of my fast. I felt no regret – only a curiosity for what lay ahead now my plans had surrendered to Mount Bugarach's instruction, as I had understood it, to descend. I had no impulse to do anything or go anywhere – only a dwindling optimism that I'd somehow stumble across the deeper purpose of my visit.

Another stranger wandered into the café and looked about for somewhere to sit. He asked if he could share my table then began talking to a woman with '2012' in large garish font on the front cover of her book. The man had a thick accent – hard to place – and spoke limited French. The 2012 prophecies, they exchanged, were interesting – very much so. Now was the time for a change in consciousness – people were waking up everywhere. Bugarach, he said, was an important centre for this change. True,

she agreed. After enthusing about her book, spelling out the author's surname so he could make a note of it, she wished everyone in the room a good day and left. Acknowledging my neighbour, I exclaimed in French that Bugarach was surprisingly empty of visitors.

"Yes. But wait – in December, the solstice, it will be different." I nodded at him, and swigged some more coffee. "I'm Patrick, by the way," he added in more confident English. "... And you are – ?"

"Mags. Nice to meet you." I only noticed then how dishevelled he seemed in a thin, worn jacket, unsuited for rugged weather. Mine looked the part but was perhaps as useless as his. His small bloodshot eyes peered out of a tangled mop of hair, looking rough and sweet at the same time. We were the same age I guessed, and yet his worn lined face suggested he'd lived the harder.

He nodded at my notes. "Do you mind if I ask you what you're writing?"

"Oh, just scribbling some things – observations about the Bugarach area and what to find out about while I'm here. They don't make a lot of sense, but help me piece stuff together when I get back home. My version of a diary."

"Mmm. I have this," he said, slipping his hand into a bag to place several lenses on to the table beside an impressive camera. "This is my memory stick!"

"Oh really? Are you passing through taking photos?"

"That depends. I'm here to... document stuff, you know? This mountain Bugarach is pretty crazy and there's some wild stuff going on here!" He pronounced Bugarach with a softened French ending. I preferred the edge of its more guttural English name. We both sipped our coffees, not in any rush to fill the silence. Patrick looked as if he hadn't slept in days, pale and twitchy from caffeine. His eyes roamed the room, as if hunting for something to speak about.

"This is a crazy place. That's why I'm here," he declared out of the blue. Portuguese and living in London – he was, please don't judge, a paparazzi. That jolted me back to my old life as a reporter – mingling with the paparazzi throngs outside courts and high-profile events, often more entertaining than the story we had been sent to cover. Their frenzy for the perfect shot to earn a crust often turned into aggressive jostle, a media crowd wheezing and crammed against security barriers. There were so many variables to capturing a story in a picture, and nothing could be left to chance for an editor to buy it. Patrick had an edge – but didn't have that hungry look, the tough skin, to survive such a gritty profession. As if reading my thoughts, he explained how times were even tougher, so he was scouting out his own

scoop at Bugarach. He had hitched there the day before, and like me, unprepared for the hostile weather. Our rapport was sealed: both laughing at our obvious misfortune. He was following the heads-up of those he encountered to meet others with their own story to tell, their own take, such as the Mayor of Bugarach.

“Yeah, I hope to see him tomorrow. He has been... let us say, doing quite well out of this whole ‘Upside Down Mountain’ story. It’s crazy, you know, there’s money in this! There are some people who are selling rocks from this place on the Internet... no joke! You order per kilo. The energy here is being sold. It’s all so –”

“Crazy?” I suggested.

“Crazy!” he agreed.

“I read somewhere the Mayor was trying to keep the busloads of New Agers away from here. You can hardly blame him.”

“Well, I hope to know more tomorrow. I keep leaving messages. No answer. And I wanted to camp on Bugarach – no such chance!”

“So, what about you – why are you here?” he asked, eyeing me steadily.

“It seemed a good place to work out what to do with my life... but I may have to find something else to do!” I shrugged, turning to the window. “We’re both here searching for a story – funny who you end up meeting!”

We caught eyes, both of us smiling at our common ground. Patrick was seeking the story of other people. I wanted to discover my own. For all our apparent differences, we shared the same weary faith that in showing up at the foot of Mount Bugarach our impulsive arrival would start to make sense. He was lost and so was I.

“You’ve heard some of those UFO stories?” Patrick asked, quite matter-of-factly.

“No,” I answered curtly, not wanting to waste time with more flaky hearsay. Straying into extraterrestrial territory was hardly going to guide me anywhere useful. There was nothing original I could add to Patrick’s Bugarach dossier either, who then talked me through a list of appointments set up in nearby Rennes-les-Bains and Rennes-le-Château. I was able to share some observations of the area, having sped along winding back lanes first thing that morning in a hired car – the enchanting mix of fairy tale castles, groves of oak and rocky monoliths towering over the land like sentinels; the goat, sheep and cow roaming the lush hills beneath large cruising hawks, a peaceful contrast to the remains of bloodied history. Rennes-le-Château’s cobbled charm and its spacious hilltop setting had been impressive. Despite being a tourist magnet, Mary Magdalene’s chapel, with its blue murals and esoteric symbols, had a strong energy. In one window,

Magdalene's image – her long auburn locks and blue cloak, alabaster jar, and skull of death beside her – was, to my eyes, an open challenge to the Bible's depictions of her passive presence in Jesus' circle. "Well, I've heard it's a really dark place, you know," Patrick cut in. "Strange rituals go on there... it's like there are those crazy people who use the place to do weird stuff!" Conspiracy theories made me weary, for all their seductive intrigue; 'what ifs', 'whys' and 'surely' could quickly flare into certainty, hunch becoming rant. Patrick was not engaging with that intensity so far but I was unwilling to find out if he would. Perhaps sensing this, he changed the subject and asked about somewhere to stay. I told him my gîte was clean and empty – a sound, cheap bet. "Maybe I'll see you later," he said, extending his hand.

"Good luck," I replied. "Hope you find some new leads."

I too needed a lead and returned to my notes. Of course – I had forgotten there would be a solar eclipse that night. Although visible only in parts of America and the South Pacific, the timing was synchronous, carrying all the more magic for being unplanned. A friend had also pointed out this eclipse was special – it fell on the same day in May honoured thousands of years before in an important Egyptian rite, marking a mystical union of the feminine and masculine. The bovine Goddess of fertility Hathor came together with her consort Horus, the vulture God with his all-seeing eye, in a perfect harmony of Yin and Yang energies. It was a festival celebrating the worlds of Earth and all above, at their most balanced.

Being at Bugarach on such an anniversary felt auspicious – given vultures were so much a part of the Pyrenean landscape, as well as my longing to return to the sites and temples of Cairo and the Nile. I had been to Egypt three times the year before, inspired by its ancient wonders. To my heart, the standard history of the temples and pyramids was laced up storytelling, to explain their likely function and even age. I preferred the mystery – and all its unanswerable questions. Whatever the truth, the myths, rites and cosmology of Egypt's ancient lore, showing life on Earth as inseparable from the skies, remained beautiful. And, once again, I was being reminded of Bugarach's link to Egypt, recorded in my scribbles.

Despite the weather forcing my descent, that rare convergence seemed like a blessing to my being there at all. This was fresh inspiration indeed to shape the grey blustery day: I would make a small offering beneath the mountain that evening, to mark the eclipse, the new moon – and the generous instruction to go down into the dry warm refuge of the valley. There was a glimmer – faint but unmistakable – of benevolence in the forces frustrating my original plan. All I could do was focus on the next step,

trusting that at some point a new direction with all its untapped promise would have to open up at last.