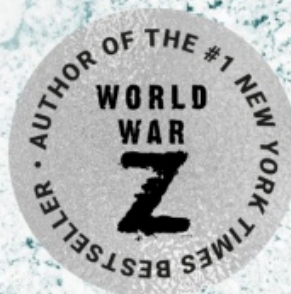




MAX  
BROOKS



DEVOLUTION

A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT of  
the RAINIER SASQUATCH MASSACRE



**MAX BROOKS**

**DEVOLUTION**

A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
RAINIER SASQUATCH MASSACRE



NEW YORK

*Devolution* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*What an ugly beast the ape, and how like us.*

—MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO





# Introduction

BIGFOOT DESTROYS TOWN. That was the title of an article I received not long

after the Mount Rainier eruption. I thought it was spam, the inevitable result of so much online research. At the time I was just finishing up what seemed like my hundredth op-ed on Rainier, analyzing every facet of what should have been a predictable, and preventable, calamity. Like the rest of the country, I needed facts, not sensationalism. Staying grounded had been the focus of so many op-eds, because of all Rainier's human failures—political, economic, logistical—it was the psychological aspect, the hyperbole-fueled hysteria, that had ended up killing the most people. And here it was again, right on my laptop screen: BIGFOOT DESTROYS TOWN.

*Just forget it, I told myself, the world's not going to change overnight.*

*Just breathe, delete, and move on.*

And I almost did. Except for that one word.

“Bigfoot.”

The article, posted on an obscure, cryptozoological website, claimed that while the rest of the country was focused on Rainier's wrath, a smaller but no less bloody disaster was occurring a few miles away in the isolated, high-end, high-tech eco-community of Greenloop. The article's author,



Frank McCray, described how the eruption not only cut Greenloop off from rescue, but also left it vulnerable to a troop of hungry, apelike creatures that were themselves fleeing the same catastrophe.

The details of the siege were recorded in the journal of Greenloop resident Kate Holland, the sister of Frank McCray.

“They never found her body,” McCray wrote to me in a follow-up email, “but if you can get her journal published, maybe someone will read it who might have seen her.”

When I asked why me, he responded, “Because I’ve been following your op-eds on Rainier. You don’t write anything you haven’t thoroughly researched first.” When I asked why he thought I’d have any interest in Bigfoot, he answered, “I read your *Fangoria* article.”

Clearly I wasn’t the only one who knew how to research a subject.

Somehow, McCray had tracked down a decades-old list of my “Top Five Classic Bigfoot Movies” for the iconic horror magazine. In that piece, I’d talked about growing up “at the height of the Bigfoot frenzy,” challenging readers to watch these old movies “with the eyes of a six-year-old child, eyes that flick constantly from the terror on the screen to the dark, rustling trees outside the window.”

Reading that piece must have convinced McCray that some part of me

wasn't quite ready to leave my childhood obsession in the past. He must have also known that my adult skepticism would force me to thoroughly vet his story. Which I did. Before contacting McCray again, I discovered that there had been a highly publicized community known as Greenloop. There was an ample amount of press regarding its founding—and its founder, Tony Durant. Tony's wife, Yvette, had also hosted several online yoga and meditation classes from the town's Common House right up to the day of the eruption. But on that day, everything stopped.

That was not unusual for towns that lay in the path of Rainier's boiling mudslides, but a quick check of the official FEMA map showed Greenloop had never been touched. And while devastated areas such as Orting and Puyallup had eventually reconnected their digital footprints, Greenloop remained a black hole. There were no press reports, no amateur recordings. Nothing. Even Google Earth, which has been so diligent in updating its satellite imagery of the area, still posts the original, pre-eruption photo of Greenloop and the surrounding area. As peculiar as all these red flags might be, what finally drove me back to McCray was the fact that the only mention of Greenloop *after* the disaster that I could find was in a local police report that said the official investigation was still "ongoing."

"What do you know?" I asked him after several days of radio silence.

That was when he sent me the link to an AirDrop link of a photo album taken by Senior Ranger Josephine Schell. Schell, who I would later interview for this project, had led the first search and rescue team into the charred wreckage of what had once been Greenloop. Amid the corpses and debris, she had discovered the journal of Kate Holland (née McCray) and had photographed each page before the original copy was removed.

At first, I still suspected a hoax. I'm old enough to remember the notorious "Hitler Diaries." However, as I finished the last page, I couldn't help but believe her story. I still do. Perhaps it's the simplicity of her writing, the frustratingly credible ignorance of all things Sasquatch. Or perhaps it's just my own irrational desire to exonerate the scared little boy I used to be. That's why I've published Kate's story, along with several news items and background interviews that I hope will provide some context for readers not familiar with Sasquatch lore. In the process of compiling that research, I struggled greatly with how much to include. There are literally dozens of scholars, hundreds of hunters, and thousands of recorded encounters. To wade through them all might have taken years, if not decades, and this story simply does not have that kind of time. That is why I have chosen to limit my interviews to the two people with direct, personal involvement in the case, and my literary references to Steve Morgan's *The*

*Sasquatch Companion*. Fellow Bigfoot enthusiasts will no doubt recognize Morgan's *Companion* as the most comprehensive, up-to-date guidebook on the subject, combining historical accounts, recent eyewitness sightings, and scientific analysis from experts like Dr. Jeff Meldrum, Ian Redmond, Robert Morgan (no relation), and the late Dr. Grover Krantz.

Some readers may also question my decision to omit certain geographical details regarding the exact location of Greenloop. This was done to discourage tourists and looters from contaminating what is still an active crime scene. With the exception of these details, and the necessary spelling and grammatical corrections, the journal of Kate Holland remains intact. My only regret is not being able to interview Kate's psychotherapist (who encouraged her to begin writing this diary) on the grounds of patient confidentiality. And yet this psychotherapist's silence seems, at least to me, like an admission of hope. After all, why would a doctor worry about the confidentiality of her patient if she didn't believe that patient was still alive? At the time of this writing, Kate has been missing for thirteen months. If nothing changes, this book's publication date may see her disappearance lasting several years.

At present, I have no physical evidence to validate the story you are about to read. Maybe I've been duped by Frank McCray, or maybe we've

both been duped by Josephine Schell. I will let you, the reader, judge for yourself if the following pages seem reasonably plausible, and like me, if they reawaken a terror long buried under the bed of youth.

## Chapter 1

*Go into the woods to lose sight and memory of the crimes of your contemporaries.*

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

### JOURNAL ENTRY #1

September 22

We're here! Two days of driving, with one night in Medford, and we're finally here. And it's perfect. The houses really are arranged in a circle.

Okay, duh, but you told me to not stop, not edit, not erase and go back.

Which is why you encouraged paper and pen. No backspace key. "Just keep writing." Okay. Whatever. We're here.

I wish Frank could have been here. I can't wait to call him tonight. I'm sure he'll apologize again for being stuck at that conference in Guangzhou and I'll tell him, again, that it doesn't matter. He's done so much for us already! Getting the house ready, all the FaceTime video tours. He's right about them not doing this place justice. Especially the hiking trail. I wish he

could have been there for that first walk I took today. It was magical.

Dan wouldn't go. No surprise. He said he'd stay behind to help with the unpacking. He always says he'll help. I told him I wanted, needed, to stretch my legs. Two days in the car! Worst drive ever! I shouldn't have listened to the news the whole time. I know, "ration my current events, learn the facts but don't obsess." You're right. I shouldn't have. Venezuela again, the troop surge. Refugees. Another boat overturned in the Caribbean. So many boats. Hurricane season. At least it was the radio. If I hadn't been driving, I'd have probably tried to watch on my phone.

I know. I know.

We should have at least taken the coastal road, like when Dan and I first got married. I should have pushed for that. But Dan thought the 5 was faster.

Ugh.

All that horrible industrial farming. All those poor cows crammed up against each other in the hot sun. The smell. You know I'm sensitive to odors. I felt like it was still in my clothes, my hair, up in my nostrils by the time we got here. I had to walk, feel the fresh air, work out the muscles in my neck.

I left Dan to do whatever and headed up the marked hiking trail behind



our house. It's really easy, a gradual incline with terraced, woodblock steps every hundred yards or so. It passes next to our neighbor's house, and I saw her. The old lady. Sorry, older. Her hair was clearly gray. Short, I guess. I couldn't tell from the kitchen window. She was doing something in front of the sink. She looked up and saw me. She smiled and waved. I smiled and waved back, but didn't stop. Is that rude? I just figured, like unpacking, there'd be time to meet people. Okay, so maybe I didn't actually think that. I didn't really think. I just wanted to keep going. I felt a little guilty, but not for too long.

What I saw...

Okay, so remember how you thought sketching the layout of this place might help channel my need to organize my surroundings? I think that's a good idea and if it's halfway decent, I might text you the scanned picture. But there's no way any drawing, or even photograph, can capture what I saw on that first hike.

The colors. Everything in L.A. is gray and brown. That gray, hazy bright sky that always hurt my eyes. The brown hills of dead grass that made me sneeze and made my head ache. It's really green here, like back east. No. Better. So many shades. Frank told me there'd been a drought here and I thought I saw a little blond grass along the freeway, but way out here it's

like a rainbow of green—bright gold to dark blue. The bushes, the trees.

The trees.

I remember the first time I went hiking in Temescal Canyon back in L.A.

Those short, gray twisted oaks with their small spiky leaves and thin, bullet-shaped acorns. They looked so hostile. It sounds super dramatic, but that's how I felt. Like they were angry at having to live in that hot, hard, dusty dead clay.

These trees are happy. Yes, I said it. Why wouldn't they be, in this rich, soft, rain-washed soil. A few with light, speckled bark and golden, falling leaves. They mix in among the tall, powerful pines. Some with their silver-bottom needles or the flatter, softer kind that brushed gently against me as I walked by. Comforting columns that hold up the sky, taller than anything in L.A., including those skinny wavy palms that hurt my neck to look up at.

How many times have we talked about the knot just under my right ear that runs down under my arm? It was gone. No matter how I craned my neck. No pain. And I hadn't even taken anything. I'd planned to. I even left two Aleve waiting on the kitchen counter for when I got back. No need.

Everything worked. My neck, my arm. Relaxed.

I stood there for maybe ten minutes or so, watching the sun shine through the leaves, noticing the bright, misty rays. Sparkling. I put my hand

out to catch one, a little quarter-sized disc of warmth, pulling away my tension. Grounding me.

What did you say about OCD personalities? That we have such a hard time living in the present? Not here, not now. I could feel every second. Eyes closed. Deep cleansing breaths. The scented, moist, cool air. Alive. Natural.

So different from transplanted L.A. with lawns and palms and people living on someone else's stolen water. It's supposed to be a desert, not a sprawling vanity garden. Maybe that's why everyone there is so miserable. They know they're all living in a sham.

Not me. Not anymore.

I remember thinking, *This can't get any better*. But it did. I opened my eyes and saw a large, emerald-tinted bush a few steps away. I'd missed it before. A berry bush! They looked like blackberries but I went online just to be sure. (Great Wi-Fi reception by the way, even so far from the house!) They were the real thing, and a crazy lucky find! Frank had said something about this summer's drought killing the wild berry harvest. And yet here was this bush, right in front of me. Waiting for me. Remember how you told me to be more open to opportunities, to look for signs?

It didn't matter that they were the tiniest bit tart. In fact, it made them

even better. The taste took me back to the blueberry bush behind our house in [Columbia.\\*1](#) How I could never wait till August when they'd ripen, how I'd just have to sneak half-purple beads in July. All those memories came rushing back, all those summers, Dad reading *Blueberries for Sal* and me laughing at when she runs into the bear. That was when my nose began to sting and the corners of my eyes started watering. I probably would have lost it right there, but, literally, a little bird saved me.

Actually two. I noticed a pair of hummingbirds flittering around these tall purple wildflowers sprouting in a Disneyesque patch of sun. I saw one stop at a flower and then the other buzzed right next to it, and then the most darling thing happened. The second one started giving the first little kisses, moving back and forth with its coppery orange feathers and pinkish red throat.

Okay, so I know you're probably sick of comparisons by now. Sorry. But I can't help thinking of those parrots. Remember them? The ones we talked about? The wild flock? Remember how we spent an entire session talking about how their squawking drove me crazy? I'm sorry if I didn't see the connection you were trying to make.

Those poor things. They sounded so scared and angry. And why wouldn't they? What else should they feel when some horrible person

released them into an environment they weren't born for? And their kids?  
Hatched with this gnawing discomfort in their genes. Every cell craving an  
environment they couldn't find. They didn't belong there! Nothing did!  
Hard to see what's wrong until you hold it up to what's right. This place,  
with its tall, healthy trees and happy little birds trading love kisses.  
Everything that's here belongs here.  
I belong here.

From the American Public Media radio show *Marketplace*. Transcript of  
host Kai Ryssdal's

interview with Greenloop founder Tony Durant.

RYSSDAL: But why would someone, particularly someone used to urban or  
even suburban life, choose to isolate themselves so far out in the  
wilderness?

TONY: We're not isolated at all. During the week, I'm talking to people all  
around the world, and on the weekends, my wife and I are usually in  
Seattle.

RYSSDAL: But the time you have to spend driving to Seattle—

TONY: Is nothing compared to how many hours people waste in their cars  
every day. Think about how much time you spend driving back and forth to  
work, either ignoring or actively resenting the city around you. Living out  
in the country, we get to appreciate our city time because it's voluntary

instead of mandatory, a treat instead of a chore. Greenloop's revolutionary living style allows us to have the best parts of both an urban and rural lifestyle.

RYSSDAL: Talk for a minute about this "revolutionary living." In the past you've described Greenloop as the next Levittown.

TONY: It is. Levittown was the prototype for prosperity. You had all these young GIs coming home from World War II, newly married, anxious to start a family, hungry for a home of their own, but without the means to afford one. At the same time, you had this revolution in manufacturing; streamlined production, improved logistics, prefabricated parts...all from the war, but with tremendous peacetime potential. The Levitts were the first to recognize that potential and harnessed it into America's first "planned community." And they built it so fast and cheap that it became the model for modern suburbia.

RYSSDAL: And you're saying that model's run its course.

TONY: I'm not the one saying it, the whole country's acknowledged it as far back as the 1960s when we realized that our standard of living was killing us. What good is all this progress if you can't eat the food or breathe the air or even live on the land when the ocean rises up over it? We've known for half a century that we need a sustainable solution. But what? Turn back the



clock? Live in caves? That was what the early environmentalists wanted, or, at least, how they came off. Remember that iconic scene in *An Inconvenient Truth* where Al Gore shows us a scale with gold bars on one side and Mother Earth on the other? What kind of a choice is that?

You can't ask people to give up personal, tangible comforts for some ethereal ideal. That's why communism failed. That's why all those primitive, hippie, "back to the land" communes failed. Selfless suffering feels good for short crusades, but as a way of life, it's unsustainable.

RYSSDAL: Until you invented Greenloop.

TONY: Again, I didn't invent anything. All I did was look at the question through the lens of past failures.

RYSSDAL: You've been very critical of previous attempts...

TONY: I wouldn't call it critical. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for those who

came before me. But you look at those huge, government funded eco-cities

like Masdar<sup>[\\*2](#)</sup> or Dongtan<sup>[\\*3](#)</sup> Too big. Too expensive. And definitely too

ambitious for a post Sequestration<sup>[\\*4](#)</sup> America. Likewise the smaller, Euro

models like BedZED<sup>[\\*5](#)</sup> or Sieben Linden<sup>[\\*6](#)</sup> are nonstarters because they

depend on punishing austerity. [I liked the Dunedin<sup>\\*7</sup>](#) project in Florida. It's

comfortable and manageable, but it just doesn't have any wow, and this...

RYSSDAL: We should note that Tony is gesturing to the houses and land

around us.

TONY: Tell me this isn't the definition of "wow"?

RYSSDAL: Is the story true about you hijacking a Cygnus corporate retreat and pitching the project only after you'd hiked them up here?

TONY: [ *Laughs.* ] I wish. They knew a sales pitch was coming, and they knew it had something to do with a plot of land that the federal government was planning to auction off to the private sector, but they didn't hear my proposal until we were standing...actually...on the very spot we're standing now.

RYSSDAL: And nature did the talking.

TONY: And me. [ *Both laugh.* ] Seriously, like Steve Jobs playing the orchestra, [\\*8 my orchestra is this land. When you're here, surrounded by it,](#) connecting to it on a visceral level, you realize that that connection is the only way to save our planet. That's been the problem all along, destroying the natural world because we've created so much distance from it.

I asked my friends at Cygnus to imagine two different endgames for this soon to be privatized land. Clear-cutting by a Chinese timber company or... or...the minimal footprint of a micro-eco-community that personified the new Green Revolution. Six homes, no more, ringing a common house in the top-down shape of a turtle, which, according to some Native American

beliefs, is the foundation on which the world is built.

I described how the Tlingit-style houses would look like they literally grew right out of the forest.

RYSSDAL: Which you can see now.

TONY: Exactly, but what you can't see is that these homes are all built from 100 percent recycled materials. Wood, metal, insulation are recycled blue jeans. The only new material is the bamboo for the floors. Bamboo's really important to the planet. That's why you see it growing all around the neighborhood. Not only is it one of the most versatile and renewable building materials ever, it also helps to sequester carbon. There are also what you'd call "passive elements," like the giant floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room that allow you to warm or cool the whole house by raising or lowering the curtains.

But passive elements only go so far. When it comes to active, green technology, we've got it all. See how the roofs have this bluish-purple tint? Those are solar panels. Peel and stick, like old-fashioned wallpaper, and "triple junction" so they can harvest every photon on a cloudy day. And those converted amps are stored in Cygnus's patented battery that not only fits invisibly into a wall, but is 13.5 percent more efficient than the competition's.

RYSSDAL: Suck on that, Elon Musk.

TONY: No, no, I love Elon, he's a good guy, but he does have some catching up to do.

RYSSDAL: Like the solar profit program?

TONY: Exactly. If you harvest more energy than you need, why not be able to sell it back to the grid? And I don't mean a rebate like in some states, I mean sell, for cash, just like the Germans have been doing for almost two decades. That's not technology, that's just good business, making money while you sit on your ass.

RYSSDAL: And speaking of sitting on your...

TONY: I was getting to that. The houses don't just harvest sunlight, they also

collect methane gas from, wait for it, your own poop. Again, nothing new.

Biogas has been used in developing countries for years. Even some

American cities are tapping into the deposits from their own landfills.

Greenloop's taken all that hard-won experience and kicked it up to

American suburban standards. Each house is built on a biogas generator

that breaks down what you flush. But you don't see it, or smell it, or even

have to think about it. Everything is regulated by the Cygnus "smart home" system.

RYSSDAL: Can you talk a little bit about that system?

TONY: Again, nothing new. A lot of homes are getting smarter. Greenloop's just gotten there faster. The central home program is either voice or remote activated, and with a constant eye toward energy efficiency. It's always thinking, always calculating, always making sure you don't waste one amp or Btu. Every room is riddled with both thermal and motion sensors. On the highest efficiency setting, they'll automatically shut down all light and heat to every unoccupied space. And you don't have to do anything more than just live the way you've always lived. You don't have to sacrifice an ounce of comfort or time.

RYSSDAL: And that goes back to the same political will that allowed Washington State to change its solar energy policy.

TONY: And put up half the money for its construction, and built the private road up from the main highway, and laid all those miles of fiber-optic cable.

RYSSDAL: Green jobs.

TONY: Green jobs. Who keeps all those fancy electronics running? Who cleans off the solar panels? Who mucks out the used-up waste in those biogas generators, carting it away along with the garbage and recycling and kitchen scraps, only to bring that organic waste back as compost to be spread around the fruit trees?

You know that every citizen of Greenloop generates between two and

four service jobs for their fellow Americans? All bused in on electric vans that charge up at the Common House. And that's just the service sector. What about actually building those solar panels and biogas generators and wall batteries? Manufacturing. Made in America. This is the Green Revolution, the Green New Deal, and what they're now calling the Green Green Society. Greenloop shows what's possible, just like Levittown did before it.

RYSSDAL: Although, we can't ignore that Levittown had a racial segregation policy.

TONY: No, we shouldn't ignore it. In fact, that's exactly my point. Levittown

was exclusive; Greenloop is inclusive. Levittown wanted to divide people. Greenloop wants to unite them. Levittown wanted to separate humans from the natural world. Greenloop wants to reintroduce them.

RYSSDAL: But most people can't afford to live in this type of community.

TONY: No, but they can afford a piece of it. That's what Levittown was all about, not just showcasing the homes, but every new convenience that was in it: automatic dishwashers, clothes washers, television. A whole way of life. That's what we're trying to do with Greentech, and as far as solar power and smart homes, it's already happening. But if we can put all these



planet-saving ideas under one roof, literally, and plant just enough Greenloops around the country for those ideas to trickle down to the general public, then we'd finally have our Green Revolution. No more sacrifice, no more guilt. No more conflict between profit and planet. Americans could have it all, and what's more American than having it all?

[\\*1](#) Kate McCray grew up in Columbia, Maryland.

[\\*2](#) Masdar City: A sustainable city project built in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

[\\*3](#) Dongtan: A planned eco-city on Chongming Island, in Shanghai, China.

[\\*4](#) Sequestration: An act of budget austerity controls set in place by the Congress of the United States in 2013.

[\\*5](#) BedZED: A sustainable community of one hundred homes completed in 2002 in Hackbridge,

London, UK.

[\\*6](#) Sieben Linden: An off-grid settlement in Germany.

[\\*7](#) Dunedin: An Eco Home Village in Dunedin, Florida, USA.

[\\*8](#) While “I play the orchestra” was spoken by Michael Fassbender and written by Aaron Sorkin for the 2015 movie *Steve Jobs*, it cannot be confirmed that Jobs himself ever uttered this phrase.

## Chapter 2

*Happiness: a good bank account, a good cook, and a good digestion.*

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

## JOURNAL ENTRY #2

September 23

Last night we were invited to a “welcome potluck” in the Common House. I realize I haven’t explained that building at all. Sorry. It’s like any planned community’s homeowners association shared space and laid out like a traditional Pacific Northwest longhouse. I googled “longhouse” last night. The images almost match this structure. It’s got a large, multi-use space with a bathroom and kitchenette on one side and a cozy cobblestone fireplace on the other. That fire gave off such a beautiful glow, mixed with the pine candles and the natural light of dusk. The Common House runs east–west, so all we had to do was leave the large, double front doors open for that spectacular view of the setting sun. I’m surprised how warm it was, certainly no colder than the nights in L.A.

It was such an idyllic setting, and the *food!* Black buttery edamame salad, quinoa with grilled vegetables, and salmon right from the nearby rivers! We started with this amazing soup course: vegetable soba made by the Boothes. They live two houses to the left of us. Vegan foodies. They actually *made* the soup, not just mixed and cooked it. The soba noodles were from scratch. Raw ingredients delivered fresh that day. I’ve had a lot of soba since moving to L.A. I’ve even had it at Nobu, where Dan and his

onetime partners wanted to celebrate their company launch, and I'm pretty sure it didn't compare to this.

"From our own hand." That's what Vincent says. I like him, and his wife, Bobbi. They're in their sixties, both short and happy and look like your stereotypical aunt and uncle.

They also weren't judgy about those of us who aren't vegan. Does that sound judgy from me? You know what I'm talking about: all the vegans in Venice, especially the new ones. The way they'd look at Dan's leather shoes or my silk blouse or how one of them called a fish tank a prison. Seriously, we were at someone's house for a party and this guy totally went off on them about their koi pond. "How'd you like it if you were imprisoned in a tiny air bubble at the bottom of the ocean!" The Boothes weren't like that. They were so nice. And Dan *loved* their housewarming gift.

Think of an all steel, upside-down *T* that you grip in the palm of your hand. The neck of the *T* extends through your fingers, a long, narrow, sharpened spoon tapering to a pointed edge. Bobbi explained that it's a coconut opener, specifically for digging into the "pores." That's what those little black covered holes are called. Never knew that. I also never knew that coconut water is the best natural hydrator in the world. Vincent explained that it comes the closest to the liquid inside our own blood cells.

Bobbi joked “not that we need homemade transfusions” but turned earnest when she explained the benefits of coconut water on a hike. They go hiking every morning and go through piles of coconuts in the summer.

“And I guess you can also poke someone’s eye out,” Bobbi added, watching Dan. He had the opener in his hand and was stabbing the air. He looked about twelve years old, and sounded like it too. “Dude, this is so sick! Thank you!”

I guess I should have been embarrassed at that point, but the Boothes just smiled at him like proud parents.

There were some actual parents there too. The Perkins-Forster family. They’ve only been here a few months and are the second to last residents before us.

Carmen Perkins is...I’m not sure she’s a germaphobe, I mean, I just met her. But the hand sanitizer. Using it right after she shook our hands, making sure her daughter used it, offering it around to everyone. She’s totally nice though. She kept saying how wonderful it was that we, Dan and I, “complete the circle.” She’s a child psychologist. She wrote a book on homeschooling in the digital age with her wife, Effie. Carmen kept calling her “Euphemia.”

Effie’s also a child psychologist, I guess. That’s how Carmen introduced

her, at least. “Well, I’m not technically licensed—” Effie started to say but Carmen cut her off with a hand on her arm. “She’s working on her degree, and already a lot smarter than me,” she said, which made Effie blush a little. I don’t know if Effie’s physically smaller than Carmen but her posture makes it look that way. Shoulders shrugged. Soft voice. Not a lot of eye contact. A couple times before answering one of our questions, she glanced quickly at Carmen. Permission? A couple times after. Approval?

Effie also spent a lot of time and attention on Palomino, their daughter. The name, according to Carmen, is a “place holder,” which they gave her during the adoption. I sensed a little bit of defensiveness, especially when Effie elaborated that a “place holder” name was something Palomino could change if she ever found one she loved more. Carmen explained that when they first met her in the orphanage in Bangladesh, she was clutching a worn and torn picture book on horses. I tried to ask her about horses, and Dan about how she liked living here. Neither of us got an answer.

You know that famous *National Geographic* picture of the Afghan girl with the green eyes? Palomino’s eyes are brown but have the same haunted expression. She just stared at us with those eyes and didn’t say anything for a second, then went back to her “fidgeter,” a little homemade beanbag. Effie gave her a hug and began to apologize. “She’s a little shy.”

Carmen cut her off with, “And it’s not her job to please us with conversation.” And went on to tell us about how the book was one of her only possessions, that and a loaf of bread in a plastic bag. When they met her, she didn’t know when she was going to eat again. Effie shook her head, hugging the girl again, and said she’d been so malnourished, all these vitamin deficiencies, mouth sores, rickets. She started to talk about what her people had gone through, the “Rohingya” minority (which I’ll have to google later) at the hands of the Myanmar government. Carmen shot her another silencing look and said, “But we don’t need to trigger her with those memories. What matters is she’s safe now, healthy and loved.”

That prompted Alex Reinhardt to comment on the deplorable state of many ethnic minorities in South Asia. Have you ever heard of Dr.

Reinhardt? He looks like the *Game of Thrones* author, without the Greek fisherman’s hat. He does, though, wear a beret, which, I guess, he’s entitled to. I’d heard his name a couple times in school, seen his books advertised on Amazon. I think I might have caught the end of his TED Talk someone next to me on a plane was watching.

I guess he’s kind of a big deal. His book *Rousseau’s Children* was apparently “groundbreaking.” That’s the word Tony Durant used. Reinhardt gave a slight, almost embarrassed shrug at that, but went on to describe why

it essentially launched him into the academic spotlight.

I hope I get this right. I'll try to relate what he explained to me. Jean-Jacques Rousseau—not be confused with Henry David Thoreau as Dan did that night—was an eighteenth-century French philosopher. He believed that early humans were essentially good, but when humanity began to urbanize, separating themselves from nature, they separated from their own nature as well. In Reinhardt's words, the “ills of today can all be traced to the corruption of civilization.” In *Rousseau's Children*, Reinhardt proved him right by studying the Kung San hunter-gatherers of Africa's Kalahari Desert. “They have none of the problems,” he said, “that plague our so-called advanced societies. No crime, addiction, war. They are the embodiment of Rousseau's thesis.”

“And unlike Rousseau's ideal, the women aren't reduced to being virtuous sex slaves in a male-dominated society.” That was Carmen. She said it nicely, smiling, but with a sarcastic roll of the eyes. Effie giggled at that and Reinhardt, reaching for another helping of quinoa, looked like he might have been working up to a less than friendly comeback.

“Rousseau was human,” said Tony, “but he did influence countless generations in countless fields, including Maria Montessori.” That diffused the situation, that and his unbelievable smile. His eyes. They turned to me

and I actually felt my forearms prickle.

“Alex here,” Tony said, and clinked Reinhardt’s glass with his own, “was the spiritual inspiration for Greenloop. When I read *Rousseau’s Children*, it codified my vision for sustainable housing. Mother Nature keeps us honest, reminds us who we’re supposed to be.” At that, Yvette, his wife, slipped a hand around his arm and gave this gentle, proud sigh.

The Durants.

Oh my God...or Gods!

It’s ridiculous how beautiful they are. And intimidating! Yvette—she looks like an Yvette—is angelic. Ageless. Thirty? Fifty? She’s tall and slender, and could have walked right out of *Harper’s Bazaar*. The honey blond hair, the flawless skin, the bright, sparkling hazel eyes. I shouldn’t have googled her beforehand. It just made it worse. Turns out she actually was a model for a while. A couple of older magazines called *Cargo* and *Lucky*. Figures. All these insane fairy-tale pictures of her on Aruba and the Amalfi coast. Nobody deserves to look that good in a bikini. And no one who looked, looks, that good should also be so nice.

She was the one who’d invited us to dinner in the first place. Right after I got back from my hike, all sweaty and gross with Dan sleeping on the couch and boxes of crap everywhere, the doorbell rang and there was this



glamorous, glowing nymph. I think I said something eloquent like “um-uh” before she gave me a big welcoming hug (which she had to stoop down for) and told us how happy she was that we’d chosen Greenloop.

And if her light, upper-class English accent doesn’t already make her sound like a genius, she’s also getting her PhD in psychosomatic illness therapy. I don’t know who Dr. Andrew Weil is (one more thing I’ll have to look up), but she used to be his protégé and invited me to take her daily “integrative health yoga” class, which, of course, gets armies of online subscriber views a day.

Gorgeous, brilliant, and generous. She presented us with a housewarming present called a “happy light,” which is used to simulate the exact spectrum of the sun to dispel seasonal affective disorder. I bet she doesn’t need it, either for depression or for keeping her flawless overall tan. Tony joked that he didn’t need one because Yvette was his happy light. Tony.

Okay, I’m supposed to be honest. Right? That’s what you told me. No one but the two of us will read this. No barriers. No lies. Nothing but what I think and feel in the moment.

Tony.

He’s definitely older. Fifties maybe, but in that rugged, older movie star

kind of way. Dan once told me about this old comic book— *G.I. Joe*?— where the bad guys took DNA from all the dictators in history to create one perfect supervillain. That's kinda the opposite of what I feel like they did with Tony, only Clooney's skin, Pitt's lips. Okay, maybe Sean Connery's hairline but that never bothered me; I mean, I tolerate Dan's man-bun. And those arms, they kind of remind me of that guy Frank used to have a poster of in his room. Henry Rollins? Not as big and buff, but ripped and inked. When he reached out to shake Dan's hand, I could see the muscles rippling underneath his tattoos. It was like they were alive, those tribal lines and Asian characters. Everything about Tony is alive.

Okay. Honest. It reminded me of Dan. How he used to be. Energized, engaged. How he used to effortlessly command a room, every room. That speech he made to our graduating class. "We don't have to be ready for the world. The world better get ready for us!" Eight years? That long ago? I tried not to compare, sitting there next to who he'd become, across the table from who he thought he'd be.

Dan.

Writing this now, I feel guilty about how little attention I paid to him during dinner, and how I didn't even as a reflex reach out for him when the ground began to shake.

It was just the tiniest of jolts. The glasses rattled, my chair wobbled. Apparently, that's been happening on and off for the last year. Just a slight tremor they said came from Mount Rainier. Nothing to worry about. Volcanos do that. It reminded me of our first month in Venice Beach, when the bed started rolling, not shaking, rolling like a ship on rough seas. I'd heard of the San Andreas Fault but didn't know about all the mini fault lines crisscrossing under L.A. I can see why so many easterners don't survive their first earthquake. If Dan wasn't so set on "Silicon Beach," I would have totally packed it in. I'm glad I stayed, glad I realized the huge difference between a few shakes and the supposed Big One. That little tremor in Greenloop, less than a truck rumbling by, reminded me of what you said about the difference between denial and phobia.

Denial is an irrational dismissal of danger.

Phobia is an irrational fear of one.

I'm glad I was rational then, especially when everyone else didn't seem to mind. Yvette even got this sympathetic smile on her face and said, "How unfair is it to leave California earthquakes for this."

We all laughed, until the next tremor happened—the human one!

That was when Mostar showed up.

The old lady I saw in the window earlier. Not Ms. Or Mrs. or Mostar

Something. Just “Muh-star.” She came in late, apologizing that she’d been distracted in “the workshop” and needed the extra time to let the tulumba cool. That’s what her dessert was called. Tulumba. A big plate of what looked like cut up churros under a syrup glaze. We already had desserts. The Durants brought them along with their salmon: some honey-dribbled apple slices right from their tree and gluten-free artisanal ice cream with local berries. I was looking forward to comparing it with my nightly fix of Halo, especially when everyone else had warned me how good it was. Mostar must not have gotten the message. Or didn’t care? Dan didn’t care that there was more dessert. He tore into the tulumbras. He must have had, what, five? Six? Chomping and moaning with each one. So gross. I politely took one. I could already smell the fried dough. I don’t even want to think about how many calories. Maybe that’s why almost no one else took any. The Boothes said something about animal butter. The Perkins-Forsters mentioned Palomino’s gluten allergy. That was kind of inconsiderate of Mostar to do that. She must have known about all these dietary restrictions. Maybe that’s why Reinhardt only had one as well. I would not have expected that, given how he looked. Sorry. Body shaming. But seriously, given how he plowed through everything else, I figured he’d join Dan in a total snarf-off. Instead, he just nibbled at the edge of one.

Polite and chilly. You could feel the room temperature drop.

“Eat.” Mostar plopped down at the end of the table. “Go on, put some meat on those bones.” She’s like this old-timey stereotype nana, right down to the foreign accent. What is that? Russian? Israeli? A lot of rolling *r*’s. She’s really short, shorter than Mrs. Boothe, who I think only comes up to my forehead. Maybe five feet or less? And built like a barrel, like if someone threw a dress on a keg. Her olive skin is wrinkled, especially around the eyes. Wrinkled and dark. Raccoon-ish, like she hasn’t slept in a year. Is that mean? I don’t want to be mean. Just an observation. Her eyes were pretty though. Light blue accented by the dark circles. Her hair was silver, not gray or white, and tied back in a bun.

Her whole energy was really different from everyone else’s. Like if the vibe of most people in the room was slow, wavy lines, she’d have this hard, sharp bounce. God, I lived in SoCal too long.

But really, everything about her was hard, the way she moved, the way she talked. She kept staring at me, watching me peck at her dessert.

Everyone else was looking at me. It felt kind of weird, like how I reacted to her tulumba somehow had this deeper meaning. I know I’m reading way too much into this. You told me to trust my instincts, but really, I started feeling so uncomfortable that I lost my appetite.

Tony must have sensed it, God bless him, because he rode to the rescue with a full intro of Mostar. “We’re so lucky,” he said, “to have a world-famous artist in residence.” Glass is her medium and she’s been sculpting in it for years. That was where he’d met her, at an exhibition at the Chihuly Garden and Glass in Seattle. Yvette added that she had been on her way to lead a “crystal yoga” session when they just happened to see her exhibition. Seamlessly, Tony wrapped up the story by explaining that he’d proposed an “epic collaboration” between the two of them: a full-scale model of her hometown, wherever that is, that would be completely 3-D printed.

That’s a big thing for Cygnus, perfecting a 3-D glass technology that is “leaps ahead of Karlsruhe.” \* I thought I’d be bored by this conversation. Dan’s college phase taught me more than enough about 3-D printing. But Tony’s enthusiasm was hard to resist, the way he talked about Mostar’s project being a “game-changing win for everybody.” Cygnus displays their new breakthrough, Mostar gets to live in paradise rent free, and the world will eventually get to see a resurrected piece of history.

“Which is the subject of my new book,” Reinhardt cut in, “resource conflicts of the 1990s.”

Resource conflicts?

I wasn’t sure how that subject fit into what we were discussing, and why