

1. Welcome to the Future

EVERY SINGLE HUMAN BEING IS PART OF A GRAND universal plan. That's what my Nana always says. We're not alive just to lounge around and contemplate our umbilicus. We're metaphysical beings! Open us up, and there's more rattling around in there than just brain sacs and fatty tissue. We are full of imperceptible essences. Invisible spectrums. Patterns. Ideas. We're containers of awesome phenomena! Which is why it's important to live right. You have to be attuned to what's around you, and you have to keep from clogging your receptors with crap. According to my Nana, the universe is sending signals every day, and it's up to us whether or not we want to listen. We can either perk up our ears, or walk around like dead piles of dermis. I always preferred the former. Which is why I found myself up on top of the roof of our dome on that fall Sunday when everything began.

I couldn't tell you for certain that I'd ever heard messages from space up there, but at the very least I had a tremendous view. Hanging in the brisk October air, Anver heavy-duty suction cups on my hands, and a no-slip rubber guard harness around my chest, I could see the entire town of North Branch arranged with the uniformity of an architectural model. It stretched below me like a wide lake of split-level dwellings, flowing over the small hills and dips in the

eastern Iowa landscape. And above the horizon was the endless ice-blue troposphere, nearly unobstructed save for the waving branches of our black walnut trees.

It was this towering group of trees that gave me my official reason for ascending to the top of the dome that Sunday. Every autumn they bombarded our translucent roof with pungent green-shelled nuts the size of tennis balls, and it was my job to climb the walls like a salamander and scrub away the stains. For this purpose, I kept a large squeegee strapped to my back along with a small bucket of orange-scented cleaning solution. And once attached to the glass, I scrubbed each insulated panel, and kept an eye on my Nana inside at the same time. Right beneath me, through a soapy triangle of glass, I could see her on her NordicTrack, grinding away. *Click-Clackita Click-Clackita Click-Clackita*. The sound was like a distant Zephyr train.

Just the day before, she had told me that most human beings only saw a hundred-thousandth of the world in their lifetime. Maybe a ten-thousandth if they traveled a lot. Only she called the world “Spaceship Earth,” because that’s what Buckminster Fuller called it, and she thought he was humanity’s last real genius. Either way, I was sure I could see my entire portion from this spot. Up on top of the dome, my view was quite possibly someone’s whole lifetime.

“Sebastian!” Nana called from below, her voice echoing off the glass. “Are you watching for visitors up there?”

She stood outside now, squinting up at me.

“Affirmative!” I yelled. “No sightings at present.”

Nana called the weekend tourists to our home “visitors,” as if they were alighting on our lawn from other galaxies in blinking mother ships. In reality, most of them made the trip in large

automobiles, and it was my job to spot them from my perch. It was early yet for visitors, though. Every Saturday and Sunday we opened our home to the public at nine o'clock sharp, but it was usually ten or ten-thirty before anyone arrived. According to Nana, people in the Midwest had to finish with church before they could seek any leisure. They had to exalt and repent, and perhaps attend potlucks.

We had begun giving tours a few years back because our home was the first Geodesic Dome ever constructed in Iowa, and there seemed to be some interest in that fact. In truth, we were only a moderate-to-marginal tourist attraction, but most years we made enough to supplement Nana's modest pension, which is all we needed. No matter how much we brought in, though, I was supposed to behave as if we were overrun with business. Negative thinking sent out the wrong kind of messages to the higher powers, Nana said. Each negative thought was like a hemorrhoid to the controlling forces of the universe. It burned them endlessly.

"Make sure to get the northwest side, Sebastian!" Nana shouted now. "I spotted some bird waste over there. Then come down for breakfast. I need to speak with you."

"Will do," I said.

I took a deep inhalation of chill air and began pressing and releasing my suction cups, moving over the apex of the dome to tend to the bird stains. At the age of sixteen, I was already the same height my father had been when he passed away, and my lanky frame covered a surprising amount of space on the dome. When I adjusted myself perfectly on the top, every major landmark in town was visible with the naked eye.

If I looked to the east, for example, I could see the slanted water tower that read "North Branch Beavers" in rust-colored lettering. Farther north was the symmetrical row of small businesses in the

town square. Then past the businesses, a little to the west, was the giant brick castle of James K. Polk High School, which I was not allowed to attend because Nana said their worldview was myopic and wrong. And finally, to the far west, I could see all four lanes of the expressway, including the exact exit that the tourists took to visit us. I couldn't see our garish billboards, but I knew they were there, facing the road, imploring every motorist to visit "The House of Tomorrow."

I scraped my squeegee slowly over the last of the stains, and then pressed and released all the way down to the brittle grass of our lawn. I had seen on the World Wide Web once that a man from France climbed the Empire State Building with just his hands and feet. No cups. No harness. He was arrested, but he claimed it was worth it to know he was really alive. It was a secret goal of mine to one day scale our dome in this fashion, but for now I played it safe. My sneakers touched the ground with a satisfying crunch, and I undid my harness and let it drop to the ground. I walked around to the front yard and turned the knob on our clear front door.

There sat Nana in our open dining room, imbibing one of her signature smoothies. Every day, she performed the morning ritual of dumping things in her Vita-Mix, a machine that pulverized her breakfast. Anything that could fit through the clear plastic shaft was fair game for one of these shakes. This morning, the concoction was the same color fuchsia as her tracksuit. She owned a rainbow of these sleek workout suits, and this particular one was made of pink, sweat-resistant fibers and had a matching headband for her shock of flour-white hair.

"Oh, Sebastian," she said, glancing up at me. "You look like a cave dweller, or one of those horrible men who collect all the lumber."

“A lumberjack?”

“Yes,” she said. “Exactly. One of those.”

I was wearing the same blue flannel shirt and jeans that I always wore. But my dirty-blond hair had gotten a tad shaggy around the ears. I pushed it off my forehead and sat down. Nana leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

“Is your room arranged to specification?” she asked, her mouth hovering back over her straw.

“Affirmative,” I said.

“Have you performed your toilet?”

“With startling success,” I said.

“A yes or no answer would be adequate,” she said.

She sipped again on her smoothie, then frowned and let the straw rest against the lip of the glass. “Well, enough idle chatter,” she said. “We need to have a conference.”

I moved in closer and watched her face. It was inexplicably tight for a woman of her age. You had to stare at it closely before you could begin to find the thin wrinkles, like hairline cracks, in the firm skin around her mouth and eyes. And it was only when she glowered or furrowed her brow in the deepest of concentration that you could tell that she had lived nearly eighty years on this earth.

“I’ll be direct with you, Sebastian,” she said. “The heating bill is going up this month, and we need to maximize all sales efforts in the gift shop. Do you read me?”

“I think so.”

She slurped at her shake.

“Additional capital must be raised. I need you to try to sell a photograph today. That’s your quota,” she said.

I sighed softly.

“What?” she said. “What is that dramatic breathing?”

“The photographs are costly,” I said.

“The photographs are art objects,” she snapped, “and they are priced accordingly.”

I sighed again.

“Would it surprise you to know that your numbers are down since August?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, they are. They’re down.”

I avoided her stare, but I could still feel it on me.

“An education means knowing how to do everything. Including things you don’t have a predilection for. You should have seen the way Bucky made things salable. He could make men salivate over a new kind of winch. A winch!”

“Bucky” was R. Buckminster Fuller, Nana’s onetime colleague and personal hero. He was the inventor of the Geodesic Dome, among other things, and, according to Nana, “the most unappreciated genius in all of human history.” His life’s work had been dedicated to futurist inventions and ideas, which he thought could eliminate all negative human behavior. Fuller dabbled in everything: architecture, physics, engineering, cosmology, design, and poetry. And he dreamed of creating a “Spaceship Earth” where every human could prosper and grow. Nana had worked with him at Southern Illinois University in her younger days. And by the time she was finished in his company, there wasn’t a single one of his ideas she disagreed with.

This included his belief that Nana, aka Josephine Prendergast, was the most beautiful and vibrant woman he’d ever met. Nana claims to have been Bucky’s mistress for two years, though it has never been mentioned in the biographies I’ve read. Whatever their relationship, though, I had been homeschooled almost exclusively

according to his philosophy. And these were the guiding principles that were tacked directly above my bed:

1. Every day I will give myself wholly to futurist thinking. Not to useless past thinking, which will steer me very far off course.
2. I will learn all the organizing processes of the universe, so I may use them to accomplish startling feats of triumph.
3. I will use my mind, not just my regular brain lobes.
4. I will forge my journey alone to keep accepted and totally boneheaded notions from blinding me to truth.

I woke up every morning and read this credo. If Nana was in the room, I read it aloud. If she wasn't, I did not. Either way, it kept my focus sharp for the hours ahead.

Outside now, a teal minivan passed and we both turned to look west at the top of the hill. This was the place where the road from town passed our drive. The van didn't stop.

"I'd better change," said Nana. "Meeting dismissed."

But she didn't move. She just placed a hand on top of mine. Her palm was cold from gripping the smoothie. She stared at an indistinguishable spot outside. I looked, too, but I couldn't see anything. I felt her pulse ticking through her palm.

"Nana?" I said.

She snapped back and looked at me as if for the first time.

"You have your father's eyes," she said. "Have I informed you of that before?"

"You have," I said.

"They are very striking eyes. They haven't dulled a bit since your childhood."

"Are you all right?" I said.

She rose from her chair, using my thin shoulder for leverage. Then she walked off toward her bedroom, slower than usual. If I had really been attuned to her patterns that morning, I probably would have noticed something was amiss. She hadn't mentioned my father in over a year. He had died, along with my mother, in a Cessna crash more than ten years ago. We almost never spoke about it.

"Can't I talk about how handsome my boy is?" Nana said over her shoulder. "Is that some kind of unlawful act?"

She walked out of sight. I looked outside a second time and saw the teal minivan drifting past the dome again. This time it slowed down and idled for a moment in the street. The glass on the windshield was tinted, so I couldn't view any of the passengers inside. It lurched forward and docked in our semicircular drive.

I stood up and tucked in my shirt. I forced myself to start thinking about a sale in the gift shop. Nana was right; it would probably have to be a photo. But maybe a Bucky Ball would do. The Bucky Balls were glow-in-the-dark plastic dome balls that you could kick or throw or hang from a ceiling. They retailed at \$29.95. But the framed photographs were fifty dollars even, and they featured our dome, lit up from the inside against a scene of night woods. Nana took this photo herself, and if you looked closely at it, you could see my tube-socked foot coming out of a bedroom closet. I had been hiding in there to stay out of the way, but my sock had lurked out at the exact moment of the flash. No customers ever saw it, though, unless I pointed it out.

I was not allowed to point it out.

I was not allowed to say much of anything to the visitors, really. Aside from the fragments of conversation I employed for my sales tactics, I was supposed to remain a silent operative. Most of the

time this was painless enough; the people from town were often loud and very intent on telling me jokes I didn't understand. But every once in while, I could hardly contain my impulse to speak up to a boy or girl my age. Someone like me who was also so very much not like me. Those were the moments I could feel my credo slipping to the back of my mind, and something else taking over.

Outside, the driver's-side door of the van opened and a short middle-aged woman stepped out in high-heeled shoes and brown kneesocks. She had flushed cheeks and large eyes, and she wore a long tan wool coat with a cyan scarf wrapped around her neck at least three times. Her black hair was tied in a braid. She peered up at the dome, a hand at her forehead like a scout's. Then, turning on a dime, she walked over to the back door of the van and slid it open. She leaned in and a pale hand took hers. Then she gave a quick tug and a ghostly teenager emerged from the van dressed completely in black.

He wore a leather jacket with straps, buckles, and snapped epauletts. And under the jacket there was a T-shirt made to resemble the front of a tuxedo. He had skinny black jeans and frayed canvas sneakers. He was even thinner than I was and wore squarish glasses. A thick lock of uncombed dark hair hung over the top of the frames like a dirty wave. Tiny headphones were buried in his ears.

He kneeled for a moment on the concrete of the driveway, retying a broken shoelace, a deep scowl on his face, then sprang up and followed the woman, who was already plodding toward our door. I walked outside to my station at the gift stand. The woman clacked up the drive and smiled at me through the little open window in my stand. She paused a moment, then stuck a pink hand right inside.

"Janice Whitcomb," she said.

I shook the hand.

“Sebastian,” I said. “Welcome to the future.”

Janice smiled politely. “That’s my son, Jared,” she said.

The boy stood behind her, adjusting the volume control on a music player of some kind. He looked even smaller and frailer up close. His jacket hung on him like a leather poncho.

“Don’t bother speaking to him,” she said quickly. “He’s mad at me, so he’s playing his music. He stays inside too much since he got out of the hospital, so I thought I’d get him outside in the elements today. I don’t think he’s pleased.”

I nodded and smiled at Janice.

“I passed this place on the way to a conference once,” she said, “and then this morning it just popped back into my head. I got up and I said, ‘Jared, we’re going to see that fascinating bubble on the hill today. And we’re going to learn something from it.’”

I looked at Jared again. His magnified green eyes were like beacons.

“Here’s admission for both of us,” she said, and handed me a twenty. “Are you the tour guide, Sebastian?”

“Oh, no,” I said, “my Nana will be happy to . . .”

I stopped at that point and realized that she wasn’t there. Usually, Nana was outside in her special tour pantsuit at the slightest sound of a muffler. I gave Janice her change. “She’ll be out in sixty seconds,” I said. “Give or take.”

She looked toward the dome then, studying it anew. I wanted to ask her more about Jared. But I sensed that he had turned down the volume on his music and was listening and observing now. His eyes were locked on the photograph of the dome, sitting in the display window. He seemed to consider it deeply. I watched his eyes scan every room, moving up from the living room.

Janice took a deep breath and shivered a little. “Probably the last of the real fall days,” she said.

“Is that a fucking sock in there?” asked Jared.

His voice was grating, high-pitched. Janice and I both turned to look at him.

“What did you just say?” she asked.

“I see a sock in that picture,” Jared said. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“Jared!” said his mother. “What’s the matter with you? Don’t you have any sense of . . .”

But Janice was not given time to finish her question. Because, at that moment, Nana burst out of the house dressed completely in her pantsuit, waving her arms over her head, as if signaling for a rescue.

“Welcome, visitors!” she said. “Greetings. Greetings.”

Nana’s hair was a bit out of place. But she carried two stickers on her fingertips. They were black-and-white, with a cartoon of Buckminster Fuller’s bespectacled head in the center, a wry grin on his face. Nana fastened one on Janice’s wool lapel. She pressed the other one on Jared’s T-shirt, directly on his left nipple.

“We’ll start inside right away,” said Nana, immediately shepherding us over the lawn. “Welcome to the future.”

“I already told them,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, and laughed a little too long.

“Nana,” I said when she was finished, “maybe you should slow down a little, I . . .”

She interrupted me with a pinch on the side. Then she gave me a confident grin and tromped ahead of me. We proceeded right into the dome, past the NordicTrack, into the very center of the living room. There was something wrong with Nana’s appearance that I couldn’t put my finger on. As she cleared her throat to begin

her speech, I looked down at her arch-supported dress shoes and discovered what it was.

They were on the wrong feet.

“In his famous book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*,” said Nana, looking up, “R. Buckminster Fuller, the greatest mind of our age, states that in order for mankind to progress, ‘We must first discover where we are now; that is, what our present navigational position in the universal scheme of evolution is.’”

She paused a moment and caught me looking down. She glanced at her feet, and then her eyes met mine. It only took a second, but her face changed entirely. Her eyes unfocused. Her teeth found her bottom lip. The Whitcombs were still gazing skyward.

“And you see,” she continued, a little slower, “when you stand in the very center of a Geodesic Dome, you have the sensation of being propelled right out into the cosmos. Like the universe is sucking you out. This, as Bucky said, is really one of the most intriguing of paradoxes: in order to expand outward, we must go . . . inward.”

After “inward,” Nana stopped speaking and stared up at the center point of the dome. We all looked up with her. The few clouds that hung above us were small and gauzy. The wind was blowing, whistling over the dome. A few feet in front of us were our kitchen cabinets, hovering over the counter, hung from the ceiling by tension wires. Nana coughed and tried to speak again. And that was when it happened.

My name was all that came out. Only she ran it all together so it sounded like “Sebas-yan.” Then she took an uneasy step backward.

“I think I follow what you were saying,” said Janice, still looking up. “Go on . . .”

I observed Nana’s face closely. It was becoming partly splotched with red. And her mouth was tightening. Just as I noticed this, she

reached out a hand to grab me. It seemed to happen in slow motion, but I couldn't tell what she was attempting. Her fingers didn't quite make it to my blue flannel. Before anyone could react, she let out a long breath and then tipped straight backward, crumpling to the thin carpet of the dome floor. The dull thump reverberated through the space.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Whitcomb, looking down immediately. "Oh my God! Are you all right?"

She bent over Nana. Nana said nothing. She seemed to be holding her breath. I stood completely frozen. Next to me, Jared very slowly removed his headphones.

"Oh God!" Mrs. Whitcomb yelled. "Is there a phone in this place? Where's the telephone?"

I pointed her toward the cordless phone, and she sprinted toward it in her heels. A bit of spit was forming at the corners of Nana's mouth. Suddenly, I felt a bony hand clap down on my shoulder. I turned around, and it was Jared. He had a grave expression on his face. "Hey," he said. "Hold her hand."

His voice was oddly calm. I didn't question him. I got down on my knees and grabbed Nana's palm. It was warm and I held it tightly. I was unable to think at all. I just looked over her anguished face, and massaged the hard nubs of the knuckles. I couldn't remember the last time I had even seen her resting. She was always up. Always in motion. Jared got down on the floor across from me. He picked up the other hand and pressed it tight. We looked at each other.

"Sebastian, right?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"This is fucked," he said.

Behind us in the kitchen, Janice Whitcomb was starting to cry into the phone.

“We just came to tour the bubble!” she yelled. “I don’t know anything about her condition.”

Meanwhile Jared and I held tight to Nana’s hands, and I thought for a moment that maybe, somehow, we were allowing life energy to course through her spindly frame. Like she was the middle link between our two life-energy links, and if we could just hold on, everything else would be fine. I listened intently for a signal from the universe. But all was quiet.

“Jared,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You were right.”

“About what?”

His enormous fish eyes blinked twice.

“There’s a sock in that picture.”