

One

THE FIRST TIME I MET PETER VERNON was at his house on the outskirts of the small town of Port Angeles, Washington. He opened the door wearing a “frog suit,” as he called it. It was a forest green, one-piece fleece union suit with attached booties, resembling children’s pajamas. It was homemade, as everything about Peter was.

It was the fall of 2004. I was a student at the University of Washington in Seattle and my thesis involved studying an elusive species of salamander. I was a twenty-two year old man with hopes of becoming a scientist with a capital S tattooed on my chest.

Even before I was born, when I was floating like a salamander in my mother’s pool, I had heard the rationale of Descartes, the theory of Darwin’s natural selection and the relativity of Einstein, as my parents read textbooks and quoted theorems to Mother’s swollen belly.

It was my first year in graduate school, where I was pursuing a masters degree in wildlife biology. My major professor, Dr. Brunsford, was anxious to have a student work on this project because there was grant money coming in from several sources, including the National Science Foundation. A previous Ph.D. student named Jacki Larkin obtained this funding and conducted a lot of initial groundwork. I heard rumors that Jacki disappeared into the Queets rainforest. Even Dr. Brunsford was unsure where she went.

My first day at “UDub”—as all the students referred to the University of Washington—Thomas Putman showed me where I’d be working. Thomas was a short, chunky, mathematical ecology student who

had been working on his doctorate for five years, and I was to share an office with him.

“You can have Jacki’s old desk,” he said, pointing to a mound of papers.

“There’s a desk under there?” I said.

“Yep,” he said. “Jacki was an odd bird, she was smart, but she started acting strange...”

“How so?”

“She was obsessive-compulsive to the nth power. That obsession, which was previously focused on salamanders, turned to other subjects. Just look,” he said, grasping something at random from the desk. It was a fashion magazine. The cover model was circled in red ink. “She started collecting junk like this from popular magazines.”

I rifled through the papers and found an article clipped from the *National Enquirer*. “Bigfoot Seen Outside the Public Library in Downtown Seattle,” read the headline. A blurry photo of a hairy ape-man was circled in red ink. I laughed, though my laugh was essentially silent, my shoulders bouncing, accompanied by a barely audible chuckle. I couldn’t help it. I was born with an absurdly small mouth. Thomas stared at me, trying to decide if I was laughing or choking. I shrugged. “Did she believe in Bigfoot?”

“She had some wild theory about neoteny explaining human evolution, and Bigfoot was a part of it somehow.” He laughed. If you took all of the laughs in the entire world and averaged them, that was Thomas’ laugh, which seemed proper for a mathematician.

My thesis research was studying neoteny in the Cope’s giant salamander, so when Thomas mentioned it, I was intrigued. Neoteny is a biological process where the physiological development of an animal is delayed or slowed down, and this process produces an adult that looks like a juvenile, or a paedomorph. Neoteny in Cope’s giant salamanders results in adults that keep their gills, resembling larvae; a normal adult

sheds its gills and metamorphoses into a terrestrial salamander. I could not see how any of this was linked to human evolution or Bigfoot.

“Do you know where her computer databases are stored?”

“Jacki always used a personal laptop, and when she disappeared, the laptop went with her. Dr. Brunsford ordered a computer for you. It was due yesterday. But for now, that’s all you got,” he said, pointing to the pile of papers.

“That’s it? Dr. Brunsford claimed there was a lot of groundwork already done.”

“Welcome to grad school,” Thomas said, smiling.

Beneath the articles on Bigfoot and fashion models there were scientific articles and data sheets, and at the bottom of the heap of paper was a small, black address book with all the pages torn out except one. On that page was Peter Vernon’s name, address and phone number.

“Who’s Peter Vernon?” I asked Thomas, who was busy grading papers.

“Ask Dr. Brunsford,” he said, his thin lips bending into a half-smile. “He’ll tell you all about Peter.”

That afternoon, I asked Dr. Brunsford about Peter.

“He was once a respected herpetologist—the amphibian guru of the Olympic Mountains,” Dr. Brunsford said. “He was involved with research in Olympic National Park since the early eighties. He gave me advice when I was conducting my doctoral research on Cascades frogs. Helped me out quite a bit, to be honest. He’s intelligent, but, shall we say, a bit edgy,” he said, taking off his glasses. “He was a seasonal biologist for the park for about two decades. He said he never wanted a permanent position. Said permanent employees were slaves selling their souls and nonsense like that. In ‘99 he quit working for the park, became extremely anti-government.” Dr. Brunsford looked at the floor, shaking his head. “Some say he was responsible for arson at the Olympic National Park Headquarters in Port Angeles. I don’t think he did it, though.” He put

his glasses back on and cleared his throat. “But he helped Jacki with her fieldwork. Some say they were involved, intimately...” his voice trailing off.

“I should talk to him. Jacki’s notes are a mess.”

Dr. Brunsford smiled, then shook his head as if to shake the smile from his face. And it worked. “You can try,” he said. “You can try.”

I phoned Peter later that day. I just wanted him to answer a few questions but he seemed paranoid, saying “you never know who’s listening.” I agreed to drive all the way out to his place on the Olympic Peninsula, hoping he would have important information about Jacki’s research.

That Sunday I caught the ferry from downtown Seattle over to Winslow on Bainbridge Island. It was drizzling rain, so I sat inside looking out the window at sooty-gray gulls that circled the boat. One tufted puffin floated in the choppy waters like a lost clown. I thought of my fiancée, Veronica, and how she would be coming out to Seattle next month. Well she wasn’t exactly my fiancée, though we agreed we would get married when we’re more settled.

Veronica was finishing field work in Montana, trapping and banding hawks. We had met a year earlier in Arizona on another research project. She grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and had a Norwegian accent, which showed when she pronounced words like toast. Her “O’s” came out long and round, her full lips pursed as she pronounced them. I loved her, but was I ready to marry her? The thought excited and scared me at the same time.

It was spring in Montana when I got the call from Dr. Brunsford at UDub. I had applied months earlier and had given up hope, but then Dr. Brunsford called. He said he needed a student to study Cope’s giant salamanders, and he needed someone quickly because a student had left unannounced. That was Jacki. Dr. Brunsford said there was enough money in the budget to hire field help, so I told Veronica she could work

with me on my study. “So I’m going to be your *field tech*?” she said, mockingly, her dimples appearing as though a woodpecker had just poked each cheek.

I took out my cell phone and saw there was a message from Veronica. She said that it was a slow day on the mountain and they had caught no hawks. She said she missed me and loved me. I replayed the message twice and found myself grinning. I tried to call her back but my battery was low and the phone conked out.

Two hours after the ferry docked, I pulled into the parking lot of Safeway in Port Angeles and checked my directions, realizing I had passed Blue Mountain Road and needed to turn around. I went into the grocery store and bought a six-pack of Redhook Ale to share with Peter. By the time I pulled into his driveway it was dark and gloomy. The clouds had sunk so low it seemed like dusk. I knocked on the door of his small shack. Peter opened it, wearing his green frog suit. I was taken aback by a grown man in children’s pajamas.

“Douglas?” he asked, and I nodded.

He smiled, flashing two large buckteeth. “Come on in before the cougars get you.”

I hesitantly stepped in.

TWO

PETER'S HOUSE WAS A GUERRILLA assault to the senses. The odor inside was multilayered, an artichoke of aroma, and it always changed, like a subtle twist of a kaleidoscope. I first smelled something like feta cheese left in the sun for a week, then peppermint mixed with jalapeño peppers, and once I adjusted to the odor, that kaleidoscope would turn again, and it suddenly smelled like sauerkraut. And then, roses.

At least this is how I now recall that first day I stepped into Peter's cabin. In reality the place just stunk.

The floor of Peter's cabin was carpeted with magazines and books, junk mail and reprints of scientific articles, and scattered atop it all were small flecks of brown rice in various stages of decomposition.

Then there were the gourds: a gourd lamp, gourd bowls, gourd thumb pianos, gourd didgeridoos, gourd masks staring blankly from the walls and a gourd banjo propped up in the corner of the living room.

"So you're an artist?" I said, nodding at a gourd mask.

Peter shrugged. His baggy frog suit made him look like a deflated avocado, and though he was skinny, he appeared to waddle as he walked into the kitchen. I stood by the front door, hesitant to walk over all of the papers and books on the floor. He returned from the kitchen and said, "Make yourself at home."

"Want a beer?" I said, removing the six-pack from the paper bag.

He squinted like a mole, approaching me—his booties rustling the papers on the floor—to peer at the six-pack, scrunched his nose and shook his head, walking back into the kitchen.

I wondered what to do with the paper sack that held the six-pack. There was no garbage can in sight, so I dropped it on the floor, adding it to the paper-and-magazine carpet.

“I only drink homemade beer,” he said, returning from the kitchen with two bottles, handing me one. “Cheers,” he said, tapping my bottle with his. He gulped down half of his brew.

It smelled like burnt potato chips. I took a small sip. It tasted like a charcoal briquette and was so bitter that my face puckered, though I tried to appear stoic.

He took another huge swig, finishing the entire bottle, then burped, and again, that odor of sauerkraut unfurled its musty wings and fluttered by my fatigued nostrils.

Peter was forty-one, but his face was wrinkled like the scientific papers on the floor, which had been handled, walked upon and crumpled. His skin was pink and he had a long, gray and black beard, giving him the air of a wise hermit. He waddled back into the kitchen, stirring a pot.

I took another sip of homebrew. The second sip was not as bad because I knew what was coming, but still, the bitterness made my lips pucker. It was awful, though I tried to deny it.

“What’s in this beer?”

“Okara!” he shouted back from the kitchen.

“Okra?”

“O-ka-ra. Jeeze Douglas, don’t you know anything?”

“Well, I obviously don’t know what o-ka-ra is.”

He returned to the living room with two gourd bowls full of steaming brown rice flecked with greens and set them on the coffee table, then hurried back into the kitchen, returning with a pan, and scooped out large brown chunks with a spatula into each bowl.

“Tofu!” he said before I had a chance to ask him what it was.

“Thanks, but . . .”

“Homemade tofu!” he said, a smile blooming from his whiskers.

“You *made* it?”

“Of course I made it,” he said. “I ain’t gonna eat that store-bought crap!”

“How do you make tofu?”

“Boy, you’re greener than kindergarten vomit after a bowl of boiled spinach.”

“All right already. I’m sorry I asked.”

He shrugged. “Making tofu is easy! Soak soybeans overnight, grind them in a blender and add water. Bring to a boil. Strain off the soybean grit, and the liquid that’s left is pure white. That’s how you make soymilk.”

“I see.”

“And you know what the soybean grit that was strained off is called?”

“No.”

“Okara!” He downed the last of his second homebrew, went back into the kitchen and returned with two more.

“You’re getting behind. Drink up.”

I took a gulp, trying not to pucker too much afterwards, and again he laughed loud and obnoxious as a donkey.

The kaleidoscope odor in the room turned once again, this time a waft of cinnamon mixed with rotting hay, or was it the aroma of a year-old pumpkin pie left in a shed full of old hand saws and turpentine? I struggled to decipher the odor, and by the time I was starting to pin it down like a beetle in an insect collection, its wings unfurled and lifted it away.

“Okay, back to the tofu. The soymilk is curdled with seawater, or nigari. Nigari is a Japanese coagulant extracted from evaporated brine. What’s sea salt without the salt, you might ask? Well, it’s a bunch of trace elements that curdle soymilk. So you add the nigari to the hot soymilk, and then,” he opened his eyes so wide that the crow’s

feet in the corners of his eyes vanished, “you’ll see chunks appear, floating in the pot.”

He had me entranced with tofu-making. His brown eyes and his soft speech hypnotized me.

“The soft, white soy curds float in a pale tan liquid, which is the whey.” He stabbed a piece of tofu with his fork and ate it, then moaned in delight.

I tried a piece of tofu, surprised by the rich flavor. “*It is good.*”

“Homemade tofu is creamy tasting.” He stabbed another chunk and ate it. “So,” he continued. “Once you have a pot full of curds and whey, all you need is a pressing box. This is simply a box with a lot of holes drilled through it. You line this box with a coarsely woven cloth—pour in the curds and whey—the whey leaks out and the curds are trapped inside the cloth. Press out the extra whey, and you have a steaming square of homemade tofu, as soft and slick as a lover’s thigh.”

I finished my first beer and started on my second.

“Grows on ya, doesn’t it?”

“Kinda.”

We continued eating our bowls full of homemade tofu and brown rice flecked with greens. “Mustard greens,” he said. “Over the years I’ve cultivated a mustard green variety that grows like a weed.”

The greens gave a pleasant zing, a mild spice that counterbalanced the creaminess of the tofu, and when I mentioned this, Peter went into some monologue on yin and yang.

“Okara,” he said as we were almost done with dinner. “I don’t throw away the okara after making tofu. Instead, I roast it in the oven until it’s black and add it to my homemade stout. That’s what gives it the coffee flavor.”

“I see.”

“Then I add a little eye of newt and some salamander spit, a little food for the brain,” he said, winking.

After dinner, he spoke about Chinese tofu masters, traditional

recipes, even quoting ancient haikus that mentioned tofu. He talked about homebrewing—a lecture, actually, speaking like a professor in front of a class, even changing his voice to a deeper tone, almost as though he had two personalities. As he lectured, that smile of his bloomed like a pink flower amid his whiskers, those crow’s feet appeared and vanished and reappeared, and his brown eyes glistened. Any questions I asked were thoroughly answered. He explained why everything he owned and consumed was homemade. It was all about environmentalism. He organically grew his soybeans, ate some green, dried the rest for tofu, producing no waste.

“Not only do I save the okara when making tofu, but I also save the whey, using it as soup stock or to cook rice in. I also wash my dishes and clothes in it. Soy-whey has long been used in Japanese tofu shops to clean pots and pans. It’s a drinkable soap! Catchy slogan, huh? Maybe I should package my whey, sell it at the health food store.”

“So,” I said, changing the subject, hoping he was as knowledgeable about amphibians as he was about tofu and homebrew. “I came here to talk about giant salamanders. . .”

“Yes,” he said. “*Dicamptodon copei*. They’re one of three common stream-breeding amphibians in the Olympic Mountains. Cope’s giant salamanders were not described as a species until 1970, making them the most recently described vertebrate in North America. It was originally described as a neotenic species, though my discovery of six metamorphosed adults in the 1980s clearly demonstrated that this species of salamander will, at least sometimes, lose their gills and assume a terrestrial adult phase. . .”

And on and on he lectured, describing all that was known about this species’ biology, genetics and ecology. I felt that I should be taking notes. As he spoke, he cited specific research projects and scientific articles. Dr. Brunsford had given me a folder full of scientific reprints, but Peter cited papers I had never heard of before.

“You haven’t read that article?” he exclaimed, walking around, hunched, ruffling through the papers on the floor of his cabin, finally picking up an old, wrinkled reprint. “You *must* read this one! It’s a classic! I can’t believe old Bob didn’t give you that one!”

He referred to Dr. Brunsford as Bob, for some reason. I had never heard anyone call him Bob before, because his name was William H. Brunsford. Peter didn’t tell me why he called him Bob though. He just continued his monologue on salamanders, even referring to native mythologies about amphibians. “Frog was the spirit-helper to the shaman,” he said.

I listened to it all, drinking several bottles of stout, as he paced around in his saggy, green fleece suit. I began wishing he were my professor instead of Dr. Brunsford, who spoke in a dry monotone. I even imagined becoming an eccentric expert in natural history like him someday, but little did I know how that kaleidoscope would turn and turn, changing from sauerkraut to roses and back to sauerkraut.

Three

I AWOKE ON THE FLOOR, nestled in a pile of papers, magazines and books. A magazine next to my face had a picture of Peter on the front page, smiling, baring sharp-looking front teeth. The magazine was titled *Craft*, and the cover said “Peter Vernon, Gourd Artist Extrordinaire.” I shook my head. Beside the magazine was a newspaper clipping with the headline: “Vernon Accused of Arson.” Again, a snapshot showed the bearded Peter smiling like he had won the lottery.

I hadn’t planned on staying at Peter’s cabin, but after five or six homebrews the entire house twirled clockwise when I tried to walk to the bathroom, and I fell to the floor. The carpeting of scientific papers seemed comfortable, so I slept there. I vaguely remembered, late at night, Peter taking out several of his gourd instruments. He played his thumb piano—an African instrument he made, with steel prongs of different lengths plucked with the thumbs. He brought out a didgeridoo made from a long snake gourd and played a song he wrote called “The Woes of *Dicamptodon*,” *Dicamptodon* being the genus that the Cope’s giant salamander belonged to. Then, he played his “gourd-tar”—a guitar he made with a large gourd—and finally, his gourd banjo. He sang, but I could not recall the lyrics. I just remembered his voice was horrible. I think he had me play a gourd drum. Maybe I sang with him also.

I heard some clinking in the kitchen, so I stood up and walked that way, my head pulsing. My mouth felt like I had eaten a bucket of sawdust.

“Have a cup!” he said too cheerfully, pushing a gourd mug into my hands. The mug had a striped garter snake wood-burned around it.