

JAMES GLAVE

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1/6th of a

Billionth of the

Planet

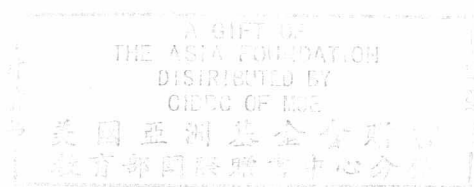


Almost Green

*How I Saved $\frac{1}{6}$ th of a Billionth
of the Planet*



James Glave



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Almost Green

For Sabrina and Duncan.

May we not let you down.

Prologue

My name is James, and I drive an SUV. It is a golden-pearl premium edition Lexus RX 300, with all-leather interior, genuine walnut wood dash, seven-speaker Nakamichi sound system, seat heaters, moon-roof, and sport racks. It is a high-riding icon of luxury, a mobile conspicuous-consumption statement, a prosperity public-address system—the sort of vehicle that valets named Chip park in front of five-star Indian-fusion restaurants. Let me be clear, though, that the RX 300 is not an indication of my hard-won success as a writer. It's a hand-me-down from my father-in-law, who offered it to my wife, Elle, and me as a gift just as our 1994 Volvo station wagon threatened to die with our two tired babies in the back-seat some night on a lonely New Mexico byway well beyond the fringes of Verizon's digital safety net. Although we are extremely grateful for the gift, the Lexus was perhaps not our first choice

for a family four-door vehicle; it conveys a not-entirely-accurate message about who we are to those who don't know us.

This became clear to me one day when I had lunch with my friend Dave, a former colleague whom I greatly admire. It had been a few years since we'd seen each other, and we were sharing a laugh over a certain local restaurant critic who we both felt could benefit from a little more journalistic backbone. Dave was describing his most recent sighting of the foodie scribe in question: "I'm sitting in this sidewalk café, right? And up pulls you-know-who in this total *asshole Lexus SUV*."

Hilarious. For at least a few months after that day—at least when out of earshot of our small children—Elle and I referred to our golden-pearl palace on wheels as "the asshole."

And please forgive me, Padre. Because even though you have that framed photo of George Bush, Sr., in your office, and even though you forward me e-mails asserting that global warming is a "swindle" and a "liberal conspiracy," I do really love you, and I so appreciate your generosity. But the more I read up on the damage I am doing each time I motor through another tank of regular unleaded, the more I can relate to Dave's point of view and the less comfortable I am getting back behind the wheel. Because I am the one running a scam.

We have hung on to your wheels for reasons that contradict our gradually increasing consciousness and have everything to do with cash flow and guilt. We don't want to offend you, and we don't want to finance something else. I don't think we can keep dancing like this forever, though. One day I'm

going to have to break it to you, Padre, that I think your very generous six-cylinder endowment is gradually torching the lot of us.

For now, assuming Pops doesn't care either way, Elle and I are looking to downsize. With the kids now out of strollers and diapers, we've finally decommissioned our bulky toddler infrastructure. We are in the market for a small car. I've brought my preschool-age son Duncan and his five-year-old sister, Sabrina, into the loop, and they have already begun window-shopping with me as we tool around the twenty-five-square-mile island we call home, just off the sparkling West Coast city of Vancouver, B.C., Canada. One recent morning, on the way to day care, my son asked me to explain the differences between our all-wheel-drive beast and the zippy little DaimlerChrysler Smart Car that had just passed us headed the other direction.

"Dad," he asked, "why don't we have a Smart Car?"

Let me briefly mention here that, like many young boys, my Duncan is infatuated with internal combustion. If it drives, digs, or flies via some flavor of refined petroleum, well, he's got its number.

"They're fun, aren't they?" I replied. "We don't have one because they're too small. There isn't enough room inside one of them for our whole family."

"Why not?" Sabrina chimed in.

"Well, there are four people in our family, and the Smart Car only fits two people. So we would have to take turns or sit

on each other's lap, and that wouldn't work very well, would it?"

"Oh. OK."

I could have left it there, but I didn't. "It *is* possible to have a car that's too big, though. Mummy and Daddy think this car is too big. That's why we are hoping to trade it for a smaller one."

"Why do we want a smaller one?" asked Sabrina.

"Well, honey, you know how we always stop at the gas station to buy gasoline? This car is pretty heavy—it's much heavier than it needs to be—and so it uses up more gas than a Smart Car. Gas is expensive, and it is also very bad for the Earth."

"But Dad," said Duncan, "why is gas bad for the Earth?"

Long pause here. *Jesus, where do I begin?*

"Hmmm. OK, when we burn gas it makes the car go, but it also makes the Earth get hotter. And we're worried that if we burn too much gas, the Earth will get too hot, and it won't be such a nice place to live when you two grow up."

"So our car is too heavy for the Earth?"

"Yes, that's right. We want to get a smaller car that all four of us can fit inside, one that uses less gas—one that's nicer to the planet."

"But not a Smart Car?" confirmed Duncan.

"Right. Not a Smart Car. There are lots of other kinds of smaller cars out there."

"What kind of car do you want?" Sabrina queried.

"Well, Mummy and Daddy would really like to get a car called a Prius," I said, offering to point out the next one we passed.

"A Prius? Why do we want that one?"

"Because it doesn't use as much gas, so it's nicer to the planet. And we can all fit inside one."

"Why don't we get one of those cars right now?"

"Um, they are expensive. They cost too much money for us, sweets. But we'll figure it out. In the meantime, we are trying to use this car less. That's why we walk to the village together so much."

"Oh," replied Sabrina. "Oh, yeah."

I grinned to myself. Duncan was hopelessly obsessed with fuel injectors and five-speed manual transmissions, but his older sister had just made the right connections in her head. She's a smart cookie, this girl of mine. I was proud of her, and proud of myself for explaining that our present vehicle wasn't so great but that answers were out there. I'd slipped in an age-appropriate explanation of climate change, without coloring in the whole grim picture.

Then Sabrina chimed in again with a pearl of wisdom that put all my eco-angst into perspective the way only a precocious five-year-old can.

"You know what, Dad?"

"Hmmm?"

"I have a vagina."

"Yes ...?"

"But Duncan has a Prius!"

This is a book about the construction of a sustainably designed 280-square-foot writing studio—the building I have come to call my Eco-Shed. But it is also about the making of an evolution. It is about my own ecological awakening and my personal struggle to reconcile an increasing awareness of a sick planet with a sprawling economic and political framework more or less engineered to preserve the status quo. It is about the end of the world as we know it and the promise of a better one to replace it just in time. It is about the small trade-offs we make in our heads every day between convenience and cost, entitlement and personal responsibility. It is about our natural instinct to flatten the protruding nail of personal sacrifice with the always-handly hammers of convenience and denial. It is about genuinely wanting to leave a lighter footprint on the planet but running smack up against a series of obstacles—some practical and objective, others less so—and muddling through with as much humor and grace as possible.

This book is also about a transformation that has unexpectedly unspooled between my own two ears over the course of the past year or so. Like me, you probably already know that global warming presents the single greatest threat to humanity in all of history and the most profound challenge we face as a civilization. You probably also understand that the Big Melt is not just another “environmental problem” we need to worry about. Instead, it has emerged as the defining moral, ethical, and economic issue of our time.

But like me, you also live in the real world. A world in which you still have to get to work by 8:30. One in which the kids need to be at swimming lessons on Saturday. One in which your benevolent father-in-law gives you a late-model import SUV for Christmas, then builds you a seventeen-thousand-dollar timber-framed double carport to park it in.

Transformational change is a messy, sometimes awkward business. As in Sabrina's ultra-mega-blockbuster crayon collection, there are multiple shades of green. There's what I like to call "baseline" green, the color of normalized everyday activities and behaviors—curbside recycling, backyard composting, and USDA Certified Organic whatever. But travel a little further along the continuum—move beyond these everyday norms and dabble with a slightly darker shade of green—and things start to get complicated. By way of example, it's all well and good to say "Enough, already, with all the air travel" but not so easy if your wife's family and lifelong friends are scattered widely across the continent. It doesn't take long to figure out why those who work the hardest to make the world a better place can easily find themselves not fitting into it very well. In this carbon-counting age, a thin line separates the leaders from the sanctimonious jerks.

How does one embrace a greener life and keep everybody in it happy along the way? How do we gently redirect our dear Duncan, who equates petroleum with power and control and liberty and adventure—feelings he is hardwired to covet—without

turning him into a playground weirdo? How do I inspire my friends, family, and neighbors without making them feel either inadequate or defensive? And more to the point, how do we get rid of our damn SUV without throwing a metaphorical family piston rod, casting shards of broken steel through the engine compartment of our reasonably well-running marriage? And speaking of marriage, how do I convince my wife to turn off the damn energy-sucking halogen lights that she insists on leaving on over the kitchen stove? How, in other words, do we transform our lives without unraveling them?

We live in a tortured age—rife with elaborate guilt trips, look-the-other-way hypocrisy, newfangled codes of ecological conduct, and everyday paradoxes. I am at times my own worst enemy. In summertime, I buy or pick organic, locally grown berries, then gleefully slather them with Cool Whip—likely one of the most processed foods available, if you could even call it a food. Every other week, I load boxes of tin cans, newspapers, and carefully rinsed plastic milk jugs into my SUV and drive them to the recycling depot, an exercise in ecological self-cancellation. Some of my behavior runs roughshod over my intentions, and I muddle forward, doing the best I can.

* * *

It was easier in the good old days. For years, I flipped past news stories and magazine articles about the latest atmospheric red flag: hurricanes, fires, cracking ice shelves, gaunt polar bears, and so on. With so much out there already fighting for my

attention—work, family, and those precious few diversions from work and family—I knew just enough about global warming to know that everything about it was hopeless and bleak and insurmountable.

Part of the problem was that I resented the solution. It meant I needed to either inconvenience myself or descend further into consumer debt. Either drive less, the greener-thans said, or buy a more efficient car I couldn't afford. But with a mortgage and two babies, I was already living close to the edge of both my pay stub and my strategic reserves of life force. Yet the advice was the same: Turn down the thermostat another degree or two and wear a thicker sweater, or retire that old wheezing furnace altogether and invest in a new one. Choose local and organic food, which is tastier and burns less petroleum on its journey to my plate but is twice the price of the bulk packs stacked up at the Big Box store. It's human nature to take the path of least resistance, and in many cases, that's precisely what this bleary-eyed, working-stiff dad did.

Meanwhile, the greener-thans tried seducing me with baby steps. Some even packaged the changes up as eco-hedonism, underscoring the simple pleasures of a greener life. As a compulsive recycler, enthusiastic composter, and frequent cyclist, I was already—to crib the language of social marketers—"predisposed." But somewhere along the path to enlightenment, I hit a wall. I'd already swapped out my lightbulbs with more expensive models that promised to slash my monthly utility bill by 18.4 cents. But that was as far as I could go. I wasn't prepared to tack a

\$386 Toyota Prius payment onto my strained monthly budget. I'd rather pump that money into the bottomless tank of my SUV, the one with more room for the stroller and the groceries.

Why? To answer that, we need to rewind a little further. As a journalist, I am by trade something of a professional skeptic. My career has always been about hunches and the inner voice of curiosity, and I have always tempered "the next big thing" with the cold water of reality. At some point in late 2005, that curiosity led me to do some digging into the sustainability movement, which, by that point, had largely edged classic save-the-owls environmentalism off the radar. Having spent years out on the margins, the greens had crept back onto the pop culture agenda by refashioning themselves as champions of eco-chic. Suddenly, environmentalism wasn't about camping out in a tree and eating carob bars or buzzing Japanese whalers in Zodiacs. The new eco-movement was sexy and stylish, all gorgeous bamboo paneling and sleek wafer-thin photovoltaic panels. It wasn't about grave problems anymore; it was about easy solutions. Every other new municipal building going up was certified "green," while Hollywood starlets were giving once-dorky hybrids much-needed va-va-vroom. Hey, Cameron Diaz drives one, and she's pretty hot, right?

I wanted to peel back eco-chic's veneer and get at the meaty stuff I suspected lay underneath. I wanted to reverse-engineer the trend. To be honest, a part of me secretly wanted to take it down a notch or two.

You see, to this jaded skeptic, eco-chic wasn't about changing the world; it was about changing your furniture. You, too, can be green just like George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Julia Roberts, the new movement promised. Just shun all that nasty plastic—except, that is, the kind in your wallet. Stick a polyurethane-free, latex-stuffed sofa bed over here (\$4,500), some recycled-glass mosaic tile accents there (\$55 a square foot), park a designer Dutch city bicycle (\$1,500) in the front hall, and on and on. Though in principle these things were all of course far kinder to Mother Gaia—polyurethane sofa cushions are damn nasty, and not even Padre would dare dis a bicycle—none of them really required any serious reconsideration of our produce-consume-dispose economic treadmill. If eco-chic had a subtle motto, it was this: “Shop different, feel better.” Though I admittedly wasn't making much of a difference myself, I knew, somewhere deep down, we all needed to do more. Much more.

Then a funny thing happened on the way to the Toyota dealership: in the name of due diligence, I drank the Kool-Aid. The more I educated myself about what was going on in the blue skies overhead, the more I realized that revisiting my own habits, at the checkout counter, around the house, and in the car, wasn't just the right thing to do—it was a moral imperative. I gradually came to realize that climate change wasn't some abstract, bumper, out-there issue fighting for my attention like, say, my neglected retirement savings or a long-planned videotaped home inventory. No, it was about my two preschool-age children and

the children they might have someday. Not to get all terribly earnest, but it stirred inside me the same sort of compulsion to do something that I imagine my British grandparents must have felt as they watched Hitler and his thugs march across Western Europe.

I resolved to change the things I could and try not to worry too much about the things I couldn't. Although I was hopelessly jealous of the swish Ford Escape Hybrid that a physician friend had bought for his family, my wife and I had already sold one of our two carbon-spewing suvs, so we tried to feel good about that. Problem is, I soon ended up where I am today, at the start of a year of green renewal, in a kind of eco-neurotic feedback loop. I am by nature a chronic worrywart. It's my mother's fault, really (sorry, Mum). From her, I inherited a nasty nail-biting habit and a low-level-anxiety gene, which I have incidentally passed along to my girl Sabrina, the poor thing. It's more a background anxiousness than a clinical anxiety, nothing that would warrant a regimen of pharmaceuticals—at least not yet. But thanks to my mild personality quirk, I can no longer hide from what I now understand. My newfound ecological literacy suffuses even the mundane routines of my daily life. Some days, inside my head, the end of the world just won't go away.

So, welcome to my one-man recyclables-sorting sideshow, set against a backdrop of creeping collective dread. Pour yourself a drink, throw in some ice—hey, the grid is still up; the freezer's full of it, right?—and enjoy the ride.