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Cryptid

When I get off the school bus, my mom is coming out of the woods. I look longingly at our house, half-hidden by trees but still inviting, yellow lights left on in every window.

"I'm happy to see you," she says, "you can't tell anyone this, but I've made progress today."

I don't have time to take off my backpack. She holds out her hand silently and I let her pull me into the trees. The forest floor is dry, our quick steps sift dust clouds into my shoes.

She takes me to a clearing I've seen before. The treetops are parted and clouds roll above us.

"We've been here before," I tell her, and point to the lean-to I made on a fat maple. I get bored sometimes when she's collecting data.

"Of course we have," she says, "that's what science is, seeing what changes." She unwinds her tape measure from her belt loop.

"My lean-to didn't change," I say, though it's coming apart a little on the right side. My mom needs me to be the skeptical one.

She ignores me.

"It's over here."

Behind the maple is a scoop in the ground. It's big, my mom and I could both fit our feet in if we tried.

"This is a footprint," she tells me.

"It is," I say back. It does have very distinct toes, and is deeper in the heel where you carry your weight. Though I'm skeptical, I have to acknowledge things like this.

"It's him," she says, and I nod.

She nods harder, to herself, and wanders off, wringing her hands. She's always moving her body somehow, never at rest. She crouches down and measures the length from the footprint to the leafy undergrowth and maples. She takes out her notebook from her knapsack and holds it up close to her face as she writes down the numbers. She forgot her glasses at home, she usually does if I don't remind her.

She looks at me.

"It's a big step, but it's just proportional."

"Proportional to what?" I ask.

"My estimated height for him," she says, waving the notebook emphatically, "Eight feet. Two inches."

"Seems kind of short," I say, "the tallest man in the world was eight foot eleven."

"Well he has to be nimble, Jenny," she tilts her head knowingly.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

"Oh, right."

She wants to elaborate, but I don't really want to hear about his evasion methods again. I turn away slightly.

She starts moving again. She picks up a leaf and puts it in her pocket, then takes it out again and presses it carefully between the pages of her notebook. She reconsiders and takes it out of the notebook, taking *On The Origin of Species* from her bag instead.

"This'll be thick enough," she mutters.

"What are you going to do with that?" I ask her.

"I want to show it to Rachel," she says, "every little thing is significant. Rachel knows that."

Rachel is my mother's friend from the Lummi reservation. My mom likes the Lummi version of Bigfoot, the *Ts'emekwes*. Their stories are very, very similar to her research, she says. That's a historical connection, good for her report—the past and the future mashing together.

Ts'emekwes are a kind of race, but she doesn't really worry about that. She calls him Bigfoot, singular. They're endangered, Rachel told her, so there's probably just the one around here anyway.

"One in our woods, what a gift!" My mom had marveled.

"Your woods?" Rachel had scoffed. They had been sitting in their chairs that folded up into canvas bags.

"No, *our* woods."

"Right. *My* tribal homeland, and *your* what exactly?"

My mom opened her mouth to protest. Rachel flicked her hand to dismiss the conversation.

"A miracle," my mom said finally, just to herself.

Lots of people just want to believe in something. We're not religious, but there's still that urge. My dad moved out a little bit ago, so it wouldn't take a genius to trace it to that. He'd had his spaces here, but now they were free rein. All his expectations gone too.

She had mentioned Bigfoot for the first time the night before my dad left. We were eating dinner while watching *Wheel of Fortune*, my dad sprawled in his plaid recliner, my mom tucked in the corner of the sofa, eating her pasta string by string.

"I saw something weird out hunting," my dad said, and my mom perked up right away.

"Weird how?"

"I don't know. Some kind of animal. It was breaking branches, being loud."

"Interesting..." my mom said, and her eyes kind of gleamed like she really meant it.

"Board Game, Changer," my dad said to the TV.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

"What kind of animal, if you had to guess?" she asked. She was leaning forward now, seeming like she might stand up. My dad looked at her for the first time all evening.

"Board! Game! Changer!" shouted a contestant from the screen.

"Maybe a bear," he said finally.

She didn't answer for a while. She leaned back in her seat, but her face was still wrinkled up from thinking. I wanted to reach out and touch her hand, but I didn't.

"It could be Bigfoot," she said, as a toothpaste commercial started to play.

"Excuse me?" my dad asked.

"Just kidding."

"No, I didn't hear you."

"I just said that it could have been Bigfoot. In the woods. I think there have been some sightings here. I heard, at least."

My dad forced out a splintery laugh.

"Alright, Molly."

"Oh come on! You must have thought about it," she said. She was doing her best, I thought, to make her tone light.

"I have not," he said, "because I am not a lunatic."

"A little harsh," my mom said quietly.

"I wish I hadn't said anything," he responded.

"Fine, it was just a bear, I'm sorry."

"Well if it was a bear, it wasn't *just* a bear. Bears are dangerous creatures. My life could be at risk every day hunting in those woods."

"Right, I didn't think about that," she said, "I'm sorry."

"No, because you were too preoccupied with *Bigfoot*," he responded, "Jesus Christ, Molly, you're a fucking adult."

He unreclined his chair noisily and sat uncomfortably stiff in his rage. This would happen a lot, his bad moods were unmappable and came out of very little.

We were all quiet for the final round of the game show. The contestant didn't guess the last puzzle. At the end, they showed what she would've won and it was the lowest amount anyway.

I wanted to say something nice to my mom, but my head felt heavy. I had missed the bus that morning and had to bike to school, almost three miles. I was too tired at the end of the day to bike back right away, so I had to sit in the cafeteria with kids in detention looking at me funny, until I finally forced myself home.

If I had said something, I would have told her that, yes, I had heard that too. About Bigfoot. There are a few trailhead stores around here that

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

sell t-shirts with his picture and little bobbleheads. It's not totally crazy or anything.

My dad stood up as soon as the show ended, leaving his empty pasta bowl on the arm of the chair.

"Goodnight, Jen," he said to me.

He left that night. It wasn't Bigfoot's fault, just the final straw or whatever, but the next day was when my mom started her search.

"Let's go, Mom," I tell her, when she starts to look a little lost, "we'll come back tomorrow."

Tomorrow is Saturday, which means a full day in the woods.

"Yeah, that sounds good," she says, picking up another leaf.

"Which way is he moving do you think?" I ask.

"West," she answers definitively.

"Why?"

"Good question!" she smiles at me, "we'll know with more research."

At home, my mom sinks onto the front steps of our house. Even though I'm hungry, I sit on the porch swing and wait for her to want in. From here, the forest looks smaller, a stretch of highway visible in one corner like a bald spot on the thick green.

We end up sitting for hours. I take out my English homework and mark down verbs and adjectives. My mom alternates between writing furiously in her notebook and looking at the sky shifting. She spreads out notebook pages and organizes them on the wooden slats of the porch. Later, she'll pin them to her corkboard setup in my dad's old study.

The sun dips behind the trees. Orange and pink light dapples my mom as she finally stands up. She carefully collects her papers. She reaches out for me and gently pulls me to my feet.

Inside, she kisses my hand before heading straight to the study. I go into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich. I turn on the TV but leave it on mute, blue light flickers through the house.

Much later, I wait in the hallway in my thickest socks and sneakers. Through the crack under the door of the study, I see my mom's light finally go out. I sneak down the stairs and out the front door. The moon is a bright coin above the trees, but I flick on a boxy flashlight anyway. I follow the same path we took earlier to the clearing. Then, I move west. I walk for a while until I reach a shallow ravine.

I stomp up and down in the silt near the water, notching a hole in the ground with my weight. The forest is rising around me, pale trees stirring with the wind. Getting onto my hands and knees, I carefully smooth out the ridges of my sneaker prints. I make a toe, and then dig deeper where the heel is. This is Bigfoot, at least the proof of him, but in the morning my mom will get out of bed and find something new just the same.