

## It's a Phase

### I

My nephew takes pictures of dead animals with a disposable camera. My sister said this might be an issue when she asked me to watch him. "It's a phase," she tells me. "We think he got it off the TV. Just don't let him watch anything on the Sci-Fi channel."

"Does he touch the carcasses?" I ask. This is my first time doing this: caring and protecting for a small human. "Should I be having him wash his hands?"

My sister looks at me like I am the disappointment that I am. "No and yes."

Before she leaves she kisses the boy on the cheek and gives him a wad of twenty dollar bills.

"Have your uncle take you to dinner," she tells both of us.

"Why don't you give me the money?"

"Because I know you'll spend it on drugs."

She's not wrong. She is paying me to watch the boy, but she only gave me half up front. I guess to ensure I keep him alive. That's my sister for you. The boy and I watch her slide into her Mazda and zoom off.

The boy is brown haired and straight standing. He rarely talks, and when he does it's in pointed, accusatory statements.

"You buy drugs? What kind of drugs do you buy?"

"The best kind," I tell him. "Now go play. I have a lot of work to do."

### II

I actually do have work to do. That part wasn't a lie. I'm on a deadline for an article. I peck at my computer while the boy wanders the woods behind my apartment. What I'm writing isn't important. I interviewed some researchers about some study they did and yada yada yada. The magazine is paying me enough for my credit card payments. So I hack away, while occasionally taking breaks to smoke a joint and peak out the window. My nephew is still alive. I think my sister would be proud.

Not two hours go by before the boy is back in the house.

"What is it? Do you need water? How often are they feeding you?"

The boy tells me my neighbor yelled at him for walking in her backyard.

"She told me to get the hell out of her section of woods because I'll scare the sasquatch."

"Don't curse," I tell him.

"Fine. She told me to get the bleep out of her bleeping section of the bleepity-bleep bleeping woods."

I put my head in my hands. My neighbor Angela is a bit loony toons if you ask me. She has this crazy idea in here head that there's a Big Foot roaming the woods behind our properties. I look at my computer screen. I've typed all of 100 of the 900 words needed for the article.

"Okay. I'll talk to her. You just keep doing whatever you were doing. And wash your hands."

Angela and I used to get along. When I first moved in, we'd wave and say hi and ask each other how's it going? She baked me a batch of her black and white cookies and I brought over a plate of leftover pizza. But a few months ago I got really drunk and peed in her window well because I thought it was mine. Common mistake. She caught me because it was around 2pm

on a Saturday and chased me back into my house with her riding lawnmower. We haven't been on the best of terms since.

Outside Angela is trimming her hedges with big cartoonish sheers. Today she's wearing a leopard print shirt, skin-tight leather pants, and thick red lipstick. She always does this: gets all dolled up to work in her yard, which I'd be all for except she's probably in her 80's. I wonder what neighbor she's trying to impress today. One day I'll make an elaborate spreadsheet of all her potential romantic interests. But not today.

"Angela," I say. I'm too afraid of her to make eye contact so I talk to the patch of grass in front of her.

"You keep that boy out of my section of woods. I don't want him spooking the sasquatch." She snaps the big sheers with vim and vigor, her taunt and wiry forearms glistening in the afternoon sun and I can't help but imagine it's my head she's thinking of every time she squeezes the sheers together.

"He's only here until tomorrow, Angela, he isn't bothering nothing."

"I don't want him stepping in the bear traps." She says this softer, more concerned than angry.

I nod my head at the ground. The last thing I need is the boy walking with a bear trap clamped to his leg. Then I'd have Angela and my sister on my case.

"Once you catch something," she tells me, "Those things are hard to reset."

I tell the boy to stay on my side of the woods and that seems to satisfy Angela because she heads back inside. I wave two middle fingers at her back. The boy giggles at this and I feel good suddenly, having earned the boy's approval.

### III

I find some spark of creative energy and bang out the article over the next hour. I read it aloud to check my grammar and syntax and then fire it off to my editor. Time to celebrate. I sit in the back yard and smoke a joint while the kid wanders in the woods like Big Foot. I'm pretty high when he emerges from behind the boxwoods and scares the bleep out of me.

"How much is my mom paying you to watch me?"

The boy says this like I've committed a crime.

"300 for the weekend," I answer truthfully, "Which I could really use."

The boy nods and stares at me. Then he pulls out the wad of twenties my sister gave him.

"I'm hungry."

"Goddamn," I say. "Me too."

We're about to leave when suddenly above us in one of the elms a Redtail hawk and a squirrel are going at it on the top branch. They're really duking it out too, the hawk flapping and screeching, the squirrel clawing and squeaking. I clap my hands hard together and yell "Hey, be friends. Break it up." but this doesn't do anything, so I find a medium-sized landscape rock in Angela's yard and lob it up at the hawk and squirrel. The rock doesn't come close. I take the boy's disposable camera and chuck it up, this time a bit closer, and scare the hawk away but hit the squirrel in the head. I apparently hit it just right because it falls to the ground without a sound and doesn't move. The boy and I go and stand over it. It's super dead.

"Don't tell your mom about this."

The boy snaps a picture of the dead squirrel with his camera.

#### IV

We drive to the AppleBee's.

"Get whatever you want," I tell the boy. "We'll eat like kings."

"Anything?"

"That's what I'm doing."

I order steak with a side of chicken and request a bowl of French onion soup be poured over all of it.

The boy orders an old fashioned doughnut with cheese curds and a side of bacon.

I also tell the waitress it's both of our birthdays. She doesn't even ask to see any proof, just brings out one of those skillet cookies with a sparkler candle stuck in the middle.

The meal is mediocre but we scarf it all down without hardly speaking. At some point in the middle of it all the boy stops and smiles at me.

"This is great," he tells me. "My mom would never let me do this."

If there's a definition of happiness, it's this right here.

We eat until we can't eat anymore. Then we eat until the plates are thoroughly cleaned. The boy pays the bill while I pick at my teeth with one of those fancy toothpicks and show him how to calculate a 20% tip.

"Your mom's a cheap bleep but I've worked this kinds of jobs. This is people's livelihood."

The boy just looks at me with his black soulless eyes and I take this as him understanding me.

On the drive home I pull over and we both throw up by the rail road tracks.

"I'm so proud," I tell him between hucks. "I'm not even drunk."

## V

I start a pit fire in the backyard and sit with my bottle of Jim and my joint while the boy wanders the woods with my head lamp and his camera. “Remember to use the flash,” I call to the boy.

“Stop yelling,” my neighbor Angela emerges from behind her hedge, decked out in camo. She nearly scares the bleep out of me.

“It’s a full moon,” she tells me. “The sasqui are most active during a full moon.”

I just nod and take a long drag from my joint. Angela heads into the woods to spend the night in her deer stand. It occurs to me that she is batshit crazy.

## VI

That night I have a weird dream: I’m in the woods behind Angela’s and I get caught in one of her stupid bear traps. The boy pries me loose. Thank god he’s there to save me. In the morning I wake up to a throbbing pain in my leg and a black and blue bruise the size of a dinner plate.

I hobble into the living room to find the boy watching TV and eating a bowl of cereal I didn’t even know I had. I’m impressed by his industriousness.

“Do you know why my leg would be hurting?”

“You got really drunk last night and ran into the coffee table.”

Ah. Yep, that did happen last night. The boy has brewed coffee and I pour myself a cup. On TV, two men with shotguns wonder some back country and talk in low whispers and then it cuts to grainy footage of a Big Foot stumbling through the brush.

“Goddamnit, not you too.”

“Please don’t tell my mom I’m watching the Sci Fi channel.”

“You like this?”

“Why else would I watch it.”

I can’t argue with this logic so I don’t.

Outside I glimpse Angela returning from the woods. She’s not dragging a Big Foot body behind her so I take it her night was uneventful. On the TV the two backwoodsman don’t catch anything either.

The boy tells me he’s used up all his pictures on the disposable.

“How?” I read the small print on the cardboard casing. The thing holds 30 pictures.

“These can’t all be pictures of dead animals.”

The boy nods his head in affirmative. He’s absolutely beaming. Is it normal for kids to be this happy?

## VII

I guess I’m interested to at least see what he took pictures of. So I drive him to the one-hour photo.

We play Jurassic Park pinball at the bar across the street while we wait. The boy has natural ability and will one day be better than me if he keeps a consistent practice. But he’s not yet strong enough to tilt the machine like me. I beat him easily.

We get the pictures and look through them right there at the counter. It’s just dead animals, I don’t really know what else I was expecting. Dead squirrel. Dead raccoon. Dead bird. Dead bird. Dead bird. Dead field mouse. Decapitated rabbit. The lady working the one hour photo gives me dirty looks while the boy and I thumb through them but I don’t give a bleep what she thinks because the boy and I are bonding.

“These are memories,” I tell her.

“What about this one?” the boy holds up a blurry image of something brown and hairy standing upright, half hidden behind a tree and some brush. I take it in my hands and inspect it more closely. It could be a bear. It’s definitely big enough to be a bear. Or it could be something else.

“What do you think it is?” The boy asks me.

“Evidence,” I say and shove the picture in my pocket.

## VIII

My sister shows up to take the boy away and I’m sad to see him go. She leaves the Mazda running so I know my time with the boy is limited.

“I’m not going to hug you,” he tells me. “Because that’s weird.”

“Fair,” I say and put my hand to his shoulder like I’m going to instill him with some wise advice. But all I can say is “Be good.”

“You too.”

And I watch them peel out of my driveway.

I go back inside and flip on the TV. The Sci Fi channel is on and I watch a little of Big Foot hunters until I spot Andrea out in her yard and I remember the picture in my pocket.