Bigfoot

There is the life other people can see, then there is the life that is hidden, unmapped; there was, for instance, the tiny piece of iceberg that could be seen from the Titanic; then, there was the part that loomed below the surface: vast, cold, hard.

My sister, Beth, and I spent part of that winter on our island searching for Bigfoot with our neighbor, Irene; we went to Irene's house after school, when our parents were still at work, and she wandered with us through our fishing village, with binoculars and notebooks, into the bamboo and cypress forests; Irene kept stacks of tabloid magazines with pictures of Bigfoot in them and Beth and I studied these carefully: blurry images of a bipedal, hairy ape turning his back to an unsteady camera. Irene believed in Bigfoot: believed he was our swarthy, overgrown cousin, wandering in all the places that were still wild.

"It's important to look for footprints and scat," Irene told us, "The creature himself can be elusive."

Irene was thin and freckled with white hair and chocolate eyes; she was the widow of a fisherman, Graham, who disappeared in a fishing trawler during a hurricane. Irene kept Graham's name on her mailbox; she set a place for him at dinner: his hat and coat still hung in her entryway, on a rack, as if he might come home again and put them on. Irene lived with a black cat, Storm, that seemed to be made of shadows; Storm would not come when he was called; he would not sit in your lap; his paws had six toes and his purr was deep and dangerous.

The afternoon Doctor Benjamin Davidson's wife left him, Beth and Irene and I were walking on Deer Path Lane in the forest beside the Doctor's huge, luminous house. We saw his wife packing a station wagon, their blonde toddler on her hip, while the Doctor yelled after her from the lawn.

"Doctor Davidson is in a bit of trouble," Irene told us when we returned to her living room for cake.

"What kind of trouble?" Beth asked.

"He's being sued for malpractice," Irene said.

"Do you think Bigfoot has been watching him?" I asked.

"We *have* found some large footprints in the cypress forest," Irene said, slicing a piece of cake for her dead husband, pouring his ghost a glass of milk.

"What does it mean to be sued for malpractice?" I asked our father, Henry, that night at dinner; he was chewing slowly because of some trouble with a back tooth.

"It means, Hazel," our father said, "that a patient believes you have done them harm."

"Doctor Davidson is being sued," Beth said.

"I know," our father said, "I'm handling the case."

"His wife left him," I said.

"Are you sure?" our mother, Ruth, asked; she was stirring sugar into her tea.

"We saw it," Beth said, "when we were with Irene."

Irene read obituaries. Sometimes, when Beth and I arrived, we found the

newspaper folded to reveal stories of the lives of men lost at sea, or pictures of children with cancer; Irene liked, in particular, to read about housewives her own age: ladies who spent years mending nets on their lawns or watching the horizon for ships to return; the obituaries told you how someone died *after a long illness*; then, they told you the story of their life: the schools they attended, the places where they lived and worked, the people they married, the children and siblings who survived them. I liked running my finger over the list of survivors; of course, some old, childless widows had no survivors at all and when they died they were like the ships that sank off our coast and were never seen again, like the planes that flew into the Bermuda Triangle and vanished from all radar.

"Where should we go today?" I asked.

"The cypress forest," Irene said.

Beth and Irene and I had never seen Bigfoot in the cypress forest behind the Davidson house though we had seen a snake that appeared, at first, to be a branch and we had seen a fox sleeping with his nose tucked into his tail. We had seen shadows that seemed to have legs, and shapes in the mud, near cypress roots, that might have been made by enormous feet; we had seen Doctor Davidson, after his wife left him, eating at his kitchen table with a strange lady: a pale creature with red hair. We had seen him washing his car.

"Can Bigfoot swim?" Beth asked as I looked into Doctor Davidson's kitchen window, watched him chopping a miniature broccoli forest.

Our father needed a root canal; Beth and I learned this in the evening when a

possum wandered onto our porch to lick a watermelon rind. We were leaned against the sliding glass door, watching the ghostly creature step out of the forest, his nude tail sliding behind him; our father was at his desk, writing a brief, a package of frozen peas pressed against his jaw.

"Jeb thinks you need a root canal?" our mother asked.

"He says I have the mouth of a caveman," our father said.

"What's a root canal?" Beth asked. I imagined a tributary in our cypress forest: something dark and wet.

"A dental procedure," our mother said.

"Something you don't want," our father said.

When he smiled our father had nice teeth -- as white and straight as piano keys -- but his gums were soft; he was ridded with cavities. He had partially emerged wisdom teeth that were prone to infection. If you met our father on his sailboat, or driving his yellow Mercedes, or seated in his law office in an expensive business suit, behind a heavy desk, you would not know that he had ever been poor; you would not know how many jobs he worked to make it through college and law school. But, deep in the cave of his mouth, his teeth remembered.

I fell in love with a girl in my fourth grade class; her name was Claudia: she had black hair and blue eyes; her skin was the color of milk. She had moved to our island from someplace further south, in Florida, and she shivered on our playground, beside the monkey bars. I brought her home the week of our father's root canal to search for Bigfoot; she had been reading about him in a book of mythic creatures: gryphons,

dragons, unicorns.

"Will you speak to Bigfoot if you find him?" Claudia asked on the walk to Irene's cottage.

"Bigfoot can't talk," Beth said.

"How do you know?" Claudia asked.

"He lives in the woods," Beth said, "He's an animal."

"It may seem like he can't communicate," Claudia said, "But apes can learn sign language, and he seems like an ape."

"Do you think Bigfoot could understand sign language?" I asked Irene later, in her canoe; she had decided, because it was a sunny day, and we had a visitor, that we should paddle to a tiny island behind her house: a circle of sand with a cluster of pine trees rising at the center.

"Bigfoot is intelligent," Irene said.

Claudia rubbed her hands over her arms while Beth and I paddled, dark water rippling around us. From our island, which we nicknamed Sasquatch, we could see the glass windows of Doctor Davidson's house growing long in the water; from here, with binoculars, we could see his fishing pier. We could see him pacing in his living room, a telephone pressed to his ear; we could see him standing in his garage, polishing a motorboat.

Irene spread a blanket over the sand, gave us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from a basket; then, she sat alone, watching Doctor Davidson's lawn, while Beth and Claudia and I went looking for Bigfoot. Beth moved along the shore, searching for footprints, but Claudia decided we should climb a tree.

"In Florida," she said, "Bigfoot lives in trees." I thought of Bigfoot, swaying in a palm tree above a warm ocean. Up in the tree, where no one could see, Claudia held my hand.

At home, our mother was making vegetable soup; our father was bent over his desk, still trying to work, but his face was swollen, and two amber bottles of pills sat on our kitchen table, filling with light.

"You should go to bed," our mother said, stirring her pot.

"I can't," our father said, "the Davidson case has a hearing."

Beth and I took bowls of vegetable soup upstairs to our bedroom, where we pretended to do our homework, but we listened to our parents instead.

"The man has a lot of problems," we heard our father say, "He gave a woman a medication that nearly killed her; his wife left him because she discovered he has a second family."

"Two families?" our mother asked, "How did he manage it?"

"I have no idea why a man would *want* two families," our father said.

Beth and I pressed our ears to the floorboards but we couldn't hear anything else. I thought of how Doctor Davidson seemed to live on Deer Path Lane in a mansion with a blonde woman and a toddler but he also lived in some other town with a family I'd never seen; I thought of how he seemed successful then, one day, he prescribed the wrong medication to the wrong woman and now he was a criminal. I thought of how lonely he looked, walking through the rooms of his huge house with all the lights on, as if he was afraid of the dark; I thought of how I wanted to marry Claudia

and how this was a secret I must keep from everyone, even myself.

There was a story in the newspaper about Doctor Davidson's second family; Irene was reading it when Beth and I came home from school; together, we poured over the photos of a dark woman and her daughter who lived in a town two hours away where, once a week, Doctor Davidson ran a clinic. Doctor Davidson's other family had known about his wife on Deep Path Lane; they had not minded that he came to them only on Thursdays.

In his other life, Doctor Davidson owned a tiny house at the end of an ordinary suburban street; while the wife I knew on Deer Path Lane had been a blonde housewife with a male toddler, the wife in Doctor Davidson's other life was a dark nurse and, with her, he had a daughter. I thought of him moving between his two lives: one large and sprawling, the other more confined; I wondered if he ever called someone the wrong name, if he ate different foods in each place, if he liked the drive between his two addresses. Was he kinder to one wife than the other? Did he ever wish his children could play together?

"He may lose his medical license," Beth and I heard our father saying to someone, over the phone, when we returned from our walk through the forest with Irene; we were excited because we'd found more footprints, and someone, or something, was building a shelter out of fallen branches, beside a lagoon.

"It's possible that Bigfoot is making a home," Irene told us, inspecting the way the branches were woven together, as if they belonged to a large bird.

I had a folded picture in my pocket from Claudia; in it, she had drawn Bigfoot sleeping in a hammock, between two pine trees. In her drawing Bigfoot was a tall man covered in fur: a man who had forgotten how to drive or wear a shirt, a man who could no longer live in a village, a man whose hidden life had become a forest.

Irene's cat, Storm, went missing. Beth and I helped her make posters with his picture taped to the front, her phone number printed neatly underneath.

"Maybe Bigfoot wanted a pet," I said.

We went around the neighborhood with our posters, taping them to telephone poles and trees; when we got to Doctor Davidson's house, Irene suggested that Beth and I shove one under his front door, so we walked up his pebbled driveway, and climbed the stairs to his wrap-around porch. We peered in, through the bay windows, at the heavy silence of his furniture, the white coat he'd draped over a chair, the wet bathing suit he'd left hanging on a railing. One of his toddler's toys was still on the floor: a plush, boneless animal.

In the woods, on the way home, we called for Storm and discovered more evidence: black hair on the trunk of a tree.

"Bigfoot was probably scratching his back," Beth said.

Over the weekend, our father had a fever; he only wanted chicken broth and to lie, very quietly, watching Westerns in his bedroom. Beth and I passed his closed door, heard the sound of gunfire and horses' hooves. We went alone to the cypress forest, calling for Irene's cat, Storm, when we caught sight of something moving through the

shadows. It crawled out of the hut -- a shadowy thing, a thin back -- and swam away in the lagoon. We argued about whether it was a man or a beast.

"It was a man," I said to our mother, at dinner, dipping my french fry in a puddle of ketchup.

"It was Bigfoot," Beth said, "What man would live under branches in the woods?"

"A homeless one," I said.

On Graham's birthday, in February, Irene had a party for him; Beth and I sat under a chandelier decorated with streamers and we ate Graham's favorite foods: strawberry shortcake, tuna on crackers, fried shrimp. Irene brought out pictures of Graham, arranged in an album: Graham holding a swordfish at the end of a fishing pier, Graham balanced on a surfboard with a shifting blue world beneath him.

"How old would Graham be?" I asked.

"He is sixty-six," Irene said, " I think he is living on a distant island; I think someday he'll come home."

Irene kept Graham's obituary on the refrigerator, held up with a magnet shaped like a lighthouse. In it Graham was *lost at sea* and his life story followed: a decade in the marines, a wife named Irene, a sister who did not survive childhood, deceased parents, years on a fishing trawler pulling up wet nets.

Doctor Davidson disappeared just before his trial; his house on Deer Path Lane went dark and, when we stood behind it, in the cypress forest, we noticed the way a certain wildness had come over it: tall grass rising in the front yard, a feral cat that slept

wherever it liked, spiderwebs glittering in the corners of his porch.

Before Davidson's body was found, washed up on Sasquatch Island, blue from drowning, Beth and I left food in Bigfoot's hut: packages of peanut butter crackers, vanilla wafers; we understood that Doctor Davidson might have become Bigfoot: a man who fell out of civilization, his back turned to us, fashioning a hut on the perimeter of the neighborhood where he had once owned a mansion. I understood this the way I understood that my father would someday have bridges and false teeth, that, in a few years, Claudia would have a boyfriend, that Irene's cat would return to her, thin and wet, and she would say Storm had been visiting Graham on his distant island where he was unshaven, wild.