

SECOND PRIZE
SWBF
by Greg Beatty

“Welcome, everyone, to our first ever Bigfoot hunting event! Don’t let the name on the banner fool you: we’re just borrowing the venue—and some of the techniques—from the local ghost-hunting group. But while we’d be glad to spot a ghost or two, we’re really all here for one purpose: to find Bigfoot!”

The volume of the answering cheer knocked Bruce back a step and reminded him just how strange a group they’d drawn for the evening’s event. He’d known it would be a bit of a gamble; new crypto events always were. He shook his head, remembering the hunt for the Jersey Devil and the shotgun blast that had sent them all running. Good moonshine, though.

But this group ... they were different. Ghost hunters tended to fall into categories: the intrinsically curious, the true believers, the tagging along for a date or a dare, etc. This group ... they were more uniform.

“We don’t usually get all-female groups, so this is a bit of a surprise. May I ask what drew you here?”

Not only was the group all female, their chorus of responses indicated they were all on the extroverted end of things. They all knew exactly why they were there and called out their reasons in strong, resonant voices: “I’ve just always been curious.”

“I like stories about the woods and figure this gave me an excuse.”

“I figure with all the stories about sightings, there has to be some reality behind them.”

“Yeah! There’s gotta be.” And so the tally went.

“All right then! These are all great answers. Now before we get started on tonight’s event, I want to touch base with everyone on how much time you’ve spent in the woods, and especially if you’ve ever spent any time in the woods at night. When it’s dark, things are different. They seem--”

Another chorus of voices interrupted Bruce, surprising him with both their confidence and their content.

“Oh, I’m fine in the woods at night.”

“I like to walk in the dark.”

And half a dozen more variations on that sentiment.

Bruce guessed he shouldn’t be surprised. He’d tried not to stereotype, but besides being female, this group shared one other characteristic: they were all big girls. They weren’t fat—well, one or two were, he supposed— but they were big. Husky. Broad shouldered. They didn’t share any other commonalities in appearance—no ethnic pattern, no shared class markers, etc.— but they were all tall and muscular. Bruce usually had an easy time leading the group. He wasn’t much over six feet, but he was tall enough to stand out, letting attendees spot him easily. Tonight he was one in a crowd.

“Okay, then. Let’s get ready. I see ...”

And he stopped. Normally he had to give both male and female explorers reminders about the relationship between mosquitoes and exposed skin, and pass around some Deep Woods Off

or some more eco-friendly alternative. This was the best-dressed group he'd ever seen, at least as far as bugs went. In fact, the group was oddly methodical. Literally every woman here was wearing long sleeves and a high neckline. They all had on either pants (the majority) or ankle-length skirts. If they had been more color-coordinated, Bruce would have thought they were part of some team or organization, but stylistically, they were all over the map.

"I see you're all ready to go," Bruce said, recovering as smoothly as he could. He gestured them forward, and everyone broke into motion. They moved well through the tall grass, confirming their claims about time spent in the wild. To a woman, they ducked readily under branches, recovered balance when they stepped on moss-covered rocks, and in general seemed like woodcraft professionals. *Let's see how they are in other areas*, Bruce thought.

"Later on we'll want to be quiet so we don't spook them, but for now we can talk freely. Let's share a bit. What do you all know about Bigfoot?"

"They've been spotted all across the America."

"The sightings have always been brief."

"They're easy to spook."

"Wasn't Utah the last sighting?"

"No, New York was more recent."

"They're tall."

"Like, seven feet tall."

"I heard eight."

"Didn't one report say ten?"

As answer piled on answer, the group surged forward. They weren't following Bruce anymore. Some were leading him. He picked up the pace, puffing a bit.

"Ten! You wish!"

"I do!"

There was laughter at that, and more answers. They came faster now, descriptions piling on top of one another, until Bruce could barely keep track—or keep up.

"Hairy!"

"Muscular!"

"Strong arms, hanging at their sides."

"Single."

What?

"Lonely."

"Powerful. "

"Want to have kids but still live a wild life."

"Passionate!"

"Romantic!"

Three or four sighs moved through the night in wordless agreement.

Um, again, what?

As the last of the group surged past Bruce, leaving him trailing for the first time in his woods-exploring life, her jeans snagged on a thornbush. The hem of her left pantleg tore, revealing a leg that hadn't been shaved recently.

Bruce squinted through deepening twilight. Scratch that. That calf wasn't just unshaven. It was downright furry.

He froze for a moment when he realized he wasn't leading a cryptozoological expedition as much as a dating ambush party. Then he shrugged. They'd paid their money, and Bruce was curious how this would play out. After all, if it worked, he might have an inside track on where to lead people to find Bigfoot kids!

Breaking into a full-out jog, Bruce called out, "Hey, ladies? Are you interested in the latest news on what Bigfoot likes to eat?"

A chorus of "Yes!" rang through the night.

Second Prize Greg Beatty, "SWBF"

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