

TRACK OF A LEGEND

By Cynthia Felice

Christmas started at school right after we returned from Thanksgiving holiday and took down the paper turkeys and pilgrims from the windows. The teacher sang “Jingle bells, Santa smells, Rudolph laid an egg” all the while that he was supposed to be reprogramming my December reading assignment, and the computer printed out MERRY CHRISTMAS every time I matched a vowel sound with the right word, and BAH, HUMBUG whenever I was wrong. And it said BAH, HUMBUG a lot and didn’t light up the observation board. We used the gold math beads as garlands for the tree because we ate most of the popcorn, and paper chains were for kindergarteners who weren’t smart enough to scheme to get out of lessons. Still, we had to listen to civic cassettes so that we would know it was also the anniversary of the Christmas Treaty of ‘55 that brought peace to all the world again. And to top it off, on the very last day before Christmas our teacher improvised a lecture about how whole stations full of people had nowhere to go but back to Earth, their way of life taken from them by the stroke of a pen. The cassettes didn’t mention that part. I didn’t think Earth was such a bad place to go, but I didn’t speak up because I was eager to cut out prancing, round-humped reindeer with great racks of antlers from colored construction paper. I put glitter that was supposed to be used on the bells on the antlers and hooves, and the racks were so heavy that my reindeer’s heads tore off when I hung them up. After lunch teacher said he didn’t know why we were sitting around school on Christmas Eve day when it was snowing, and he told us to go build snowmen, and he swept up the scraps of construction paper and celluloid and glitter alone while we put our Christmas stars in plastic sacks and tucked them into our jackets so that our hands would be free to make snowballs.

My best friend, Timothy, and I took some of the gingerbread cookies sprinkled with red sugar to leave in the woods for Big foot, then ran out the door and got pelted with snowballs by upper-graders who must have sneaked out earlier.

Timothy and I ran over the new-fallen snow in the playground to duck behind the farthest fence, where we scooped up snow and fired back. We were evenly matched for a while, snowballs flying thick and heavy. Then the little kids came out of school and betrayed us by striking our flanks.

“The little brats,” Timothy muttered, throwing down a slushball. I suspect he was less upset that the little ones had decided to team up with

the big kids than that one of them was crying and making his way to the school building, and someone was sure to come checking to see who was making ice balls. "Come on," he said, still feigning disgust. "Let's go build our own fort and get ready for Bigfoot."

The creature of yore was not so legendary in our parts, where we kids often found footprints in mud after rainstorms and in the snows of winter, especially in the woods surrounding the school. The grown-ups just shook their heads and said someone was playing a joke, that nobody wore shoes that big and that a real Bigfoot would be barefoot, like in the video show. But no one really knew what Bigfoot's toes looked like. My dad said even the video maker just guessed. We kids figured Bigfoot's foot was full of matted hair or lumpy skin that left those strange-looking ridges. And we just knew that Bigfoot came out in the dark storms looking for a stray child to eat, and that gingerbread cookies merely whetted the creature's appetite.

Leaving the school behind us, we made our way toward the greenway along the hoverpath, where the freighters sprayed us with a blizzard of snow when they whooshed by.

"Look here," Timothy shouted, tugging at something he'd stepped on in the snow. Both of us scratched at the snow and pulled until we freed a great piece of cardboard. It was frozen stiff.

"Let's go to the hill," I said.

Dragging our cardboard sled behind us, we trudged along Bigfoot's own trail through the woods. You could tell the creature had passed here from time to time because branches were broken back wider than any kid could cause, and the path circled the hill outside a wire-and-picket fence, and the gate was always locked to keep Bigfoot and everyone else out. The hill was treeless, acres of grass manicured by robots with great rotary blades in summer and smooth as a cue ball in winter. Perfect for sledding. The only trouble with the hill was that Timothy's aunt lived in the shiny tin-can-lying-on-its-side house at the top. I knew she was weird because Timothy said she never came outside or went anywhere, and my parents would shake their heads when they talked about her. But we had the cardboard sled in our hands, and he was pulling strongly; so I guess he didn't care about his weird aunt.

The fence might keep clumsy Bigfoot out but delayed us only a few seconds when we snagged a ragged edge of the cardboard on it and had to stop to free it. Then we climbed what seemed to be fourteen thousand one hundred ten meters of elevation to a place a little below the odd house,

where we finally rested, breathing as hard as ancient warriors who'd just dragged their elephant up the Alps.

Timothy's aunt's house whirred and clicked, and I looked up. There were no windows, but it had a thousand eyes hidden in the silver rivets that held the metal skin over tungsten bones.

In the white snow it looked desolate, save for a trickle of smoke.

"Hey, your aunt's house is on fire," I said. Timothy gave me a look that always made me feel stupid. "Her heat exchanger's broken. She's burning gas," he said. "I know because she asked my dad to get her a new one before Christmas."

"Does she come to your house for Christmas?"

"Nah. Sometimes she comes video, just like she used to when she lived up there." He gestured skyward, where snowflakes were crystallizing and falling on us, but I knew he meant higher, one of the space stations or orbiting cities. "It's better now because there's no delay when we talk. It's like she was in Portland or something."

"What's she like?" I said, suddenly wondering about this peculiar person who had been a fixture in my community since I was little, yet whom I'd never seen.

Timothy shrugged. "Like an aunt. . . always wanting to know if I ate my peas." Warrior Timothy was patting the cardboard elephant sled, making ready to resume our journey in the Alps.

"Why doesn't she come out of there?"

"My dad says she's got a complex or something from when she lived up there." He gestured skyward again.

"What's a complex?"

For a moment Timothy looked blank, then he said, "It's like what Joan-John and Lester-Linda Johnson have."

"You mean she goes to the clinic and comes back something else?" I said, wondering if his aunt used to be his uncle.

"I mean she doesn't go anywhere."

“But like to the consumer showcases down in the mall and the restaurant. She goes there, doesn’t she?”

“Nope. Last year when her mux cable got cut and her video wasn’t working she practically starved to death.”

“But why? Is she crippled or something?” The teacher had said he knew a spacer who spent most of his time in a swimming pool, and when he did come out he had to use a wheelchair because he was too old to get used to gravity again.

“No, she’s not crippled.”

“What’s she look like?”

“My mother.”

Timothy’s mother was regular looking; so whatever a complex was, it had nothing to do with getting ugly. The Johnsons weren’t ugly either, but they went through what my dad called phases, which he said was all in their heads. Maybe Timothy’s aunt’s complex was like Lester Johnson’s Linda phase, but that didn’t seem right because Lester-Linda came outside all the time and Timothy’s aunt never did.

“What does she do inside all the time?”

“Works.”

I nodded, considerably wiser. The old public buildings were down in the woods with the school, mostly monuments to waste of space ever since we got our mux cable that fed into every building in the community. Most of the grown-ups stopped *going* to work, and they stopped coming to school on voting day, but we still had to go, and not just on voting day.

“Come on,” Timothy said.

But the smoke fascinated me. It puffed out of a silver pipe and skittered down the side of the house as if the fluffy falling snow was pushing it down. It smelled strange. I formed a snowball, a good solid one, took aim at the silver pipe, and let it fly.

“Missed by at least a kilometer,” Timothy said, scowling.

Undaunted I tried another, missed the pipe, but struck the house, which resounded with a metallic thud. I'd closed one of the house's eyes with a white patch of snow. Timothy grinned at me, his mind tracking with mine. She'd have to come out to get the snow off the sensors. Soon we had pasted a wavy line of white spots about midway up the silver wall.

"One more on the right," commanded Timothy. But he stopped midswing when we heard a loud whirring noise. Around the hill came a grass cutter, furiously churning snow with its blades.

"Retreat!" shouted Attila the Hun. Timothy grabbed the frozen cardboard sled.

We leaped aboard and the elephant sank to its knees. I didn't need Timothy to tell me to run.

At the fence we threw ourselves over the frozen pickets, miraculously not getting our clothes hung up in the wires. The grass cutter whirred along the fenced perimeter, frustrated, thank goodness, by the limits of its oxide-on-sand mind.

"Ever seen what, one of those things does to a rabbit?" he asked me.

"No."

"Cuts them up into bits of fur and guts," Timothy said solemnly.

"Your aunt's weird," I said, grateful to be on the right side of the fence.

"Uh oh. You lost a glove," Timothy said.

I nodded unhappily and turned to look over at the wrong side of the fence. Shreds of felt and wire and red nylon lay in the grass cutter's swath.

We walked on, feeling like two dejected warriors in the Alpine woods without our elephant and minus one almost-new battery-operated glove until we spied Bigfoot's tracks in the snow—big, round splotches leading up the side of the wash. Heartened by our discovery, we armed ourselves properly with snowballs and told each other this was the genuine article. The snowfall was heavier now, really Bigfoot weather, and we knew how much Bigfoot liked storms, or we'd find tracks all the time.

We followed the footprints all the way to the Wigginses' house, only

to find little Bobby Wiggles in them, hand-me-down boots overheating and making great puddles with each step.

Bobby stood looked at us, cheeks flushed from heat or stinging wind. Then he or she—I couldn't tell if Bobby Wiggles was a boy or a girl—giggled and went running into the house.

Timothy and I stayed out in the snow searching for Bigfoot tracks but found only rabbit tracks, which we followed in hopes that Bigfoot might do likewise, since aside from children there was nothing else for it to eat in our neighborhood, and no children had ever been reported eaten. Bigfoot may not have been hungry, but we had had only a few gingerbread cookies since noon; so when the rabbit tracks zagged near my house, we didn't turn again. We forgot the rabbit and Bigfoot and walked the rest of the way through the ghost-white woods to my front door, where we kicked off our boots and threw down our jackets and gloves. Mom and Dad were in the media room in front of the kitchen monitor, checking the Christmas menu.

“Go back and plug your gloves into the recharger,” Dad said without glancing up.

But Mom must have looked up because she said right away, “Both of them.”

“I lost one,” I said.

“Go back and find it.”

Timothy and I looked at each other.

Mom was still watching me. “It won't do any good,” I said finally. “We were up on the hill, and Timothy's aunt sicced the grass cutter on us.”

“Why would she do a thing like that?”

Timothy and I shrugged.

“Well, I'll call her and ask her to let you get your glove,” Dad said, rolling his chair to the comm console.

“The grass cutter got it,” I said, more willing to face punishment for losing a glove than what might happen if Dad found out the day before Christmas that we'd closed her house's eyes.

"I told you she was getting crazier by the minute," Dad said.

"She isn't dangerous."

"How do you know that? The grass cutter, of all things."

"She has too much dread to be deliberately mean. I don't doubt for a second that she knew a couple of kids could outrun the grass cutter, and what else could she do? Go outside and ask them to go away?" Mom shook her head. "Her heart would stop from the anxiety of leaving her little sanctuary."

"She left the clinic fast enough when it caught on fire, and when she first came back that was as much her sanctuary as her spaceship house is now."

"You can't expect her to have enough energy to treat every minor day-to-day incident like an emergency."

"I think she should go back where she came from."

"Hush, dear. We voted for the treaty."

"They ought to have sent them to L-5."

"Couldn't, and you know—"

Timothy and I left them talking about his aunt, but I knew I'd probably not heard the end of the glove. That was the problem with sexagenarian parents; they knew all the tricks from the first set of kids, and they had very good memories.

In the kitchen we had hot chocolate, slopping some on the puzzle my big sister had broken back into a thousand pieces before she gave it to me.

"What are you getting for Christmas?" Timothy asked me, his cheeks still pink from being outdoors and his eyes as bright as tinsel fluttering in the warm convection currents of the house.

I shrugged. My parents were firm about keeping the Christmas list up-to-date, and that started every year on December twenty-sixth. I still wanted the fighting kite I'd keyed into the list last March, and the bicycle sail and the knife and the Adventure Station with vitalized figures and voice control. I also wanted the two hundred and eighty other items on my list and

knew I'd be lucky if ten were under the tree tomorrow morning and that some of them would be clothes, which I never asked for but always received. "An Adventure Station," I finally said, more hopeful than certain. It was the one thing I'd talked about a lot, but Dad kept saying it was too much like the Hovercraft Depot set I'd gotten last year.

"Me too," Timothy said, "and a sled. Which should we play with first?"

A sled! I didn't have to go to the terminal and ask for a display of my Christmas list to know that a sled was not on it. My old one had worked just fine all last winter, but I'd used it in June to dam up Cotton Creek to make a pond for my race boats, and a flood had swelled the creek waters and carried it off and busted the runners. Too late to be remembering on Christmas Eve, because I didn't believe in Santa Claus or Kris Kringle. Only in Bigfoot, because I had seen the footprints with my own eyes.

"We should play with the sleds first," Timothy said, "before the other kids come out and ruin the snow."

"I'm going to get a knife with a real L-5 crystal handle."

Timothy shrugged. "My aunt's going to give me one of hers someday. She has lots of stuff from when she was a spacer."

"Yeah, but my knife will be new. Then I'd like to see Bigfoot get away from me!"

"We can bring Bigfoot back on my sled," Timothy said excitedly. He chugalugged the rest of his chocolate. "Early, right after presents. Meet me at the hill."

"Why at the hill?" I said suspiciously. But Timothy was already heading for the door and pulling on his boots.

"Best place for sledding."

"But what about your aunt's mower?" I said, whispering now.

"Early," he reminded me as he stepped out into the snow. I followed him, holding the door open. "And bring your sled."

"What time do you open presents?" I said. But if Timothy answered, I didn't hear.

The snow was falling in fat flakes, and the wind had come up and the snow was starting to drift over the hedges. Funny how it wasn't really dark with all that white around, and funny, too, how I wasn't so glad that it was coming down. What good was it without a sled? I could use the cardboard if I could find it again, which I doubted, for I could tell that if it kept snowing at the rate I was seeing from my doorway, there would be half a meter or more by morning, which also meant the grass cutter would get clogged before it got five meters from Timothy's crazy aunt's house. Timothy would let me try his sled if I pulled it up the hill, 'cause if he didn't I wouldn't let him hold my L-5 crystal-handled knife ... if I got one.

"Close the door!" my father shouted, and I closed it and went to bed early, knowing I couldn't sleep but wanting to because morning would come sooner if I did, and when it did I would not have a sled—maybe not even an L-5 crystal-handled knife—only an old Adventure Station that Timothy didn't want to play until after lunch, and who cared about snow anyhow, even if it did come down so fast and hard that it was catching on my bedroom window like a blanket before my sleepy eyes.

I woke to silence and the sure knowledge that it was Christmas morning. I didn't know whether to look out the window or check under the tree first, until I heard my sister in the hall and made a dash to beat her to the living room, where my parents had piled all the packages, with their red bows and wrappings, under the tree.

The big one wrapped in red plastic had to be the Adventure Station, though my parents were famous for putting little items like L-5 crystal-handled knives in packages the size of CRTs, complete with rocks to weigh it down so you couldn't tell. I couldn't wait to find out for sure what was in it, but I had to because my parents came in muttering about coffee and asking if it was even dawn and not caring that it wasn't when they had their coffee and I put their first presents to open in their laps. I wanted to open the red plastic-covered package, but I couldn't tear the plastic, and my big sister was hogging the slitter; so I opened a smaller one with my name on it. A shiny blue crystal that was almost mirror bright but not quite, so I could see the steel blade was in the package, and suddenly I felt good about the snow, too, and about looking for Bigfoot even if we did have to carry it back on Timothy's sled. I got the slitter away from my sister and sliced open the Adventure Station, only it wasn't. I looked at my parents in complete amazement and saw that they both had that special knowing twinkle in their eyes that parents get when they've done something you don't expect them to do. In the packing popcorn was a new sled, the collapsible kind with a handle for carrying it back up the hill and a retractable towing cord and three runner configurations so that it could be used on

hard-packed snow or powder. I extended it to its full length right there in the living room, awed by its metallic gleam and classy black racing stripes.

And then with my knife strapped around the outside of my jacket and my sled in hand, I was off to meet Timothy, determined to have Bigfoot in tow before lunchtime. The going was slow because the drifts were tall and I loved to break their peaks and feel the stuff collapse beneath my feet and to stand under the tallest pines and shake the snow off the branches, as if I were in a blizzard and not in the first sparkling rays of sunshine. I went the long way to the hill, sure I would find traces of Bigfoot so early in the morning, and I did. Huge prints that were bigger than I could make, even though they were filled in with new snow, and the stride sure wasn't kid-size. Besides, what grown-up would walk through the woods on Christmas Eve during a snowstorm? I'd follow them, I decided, until I had to turn off for the hill, then Timothy and I would come back and follow the tracks to Bigfoot's lair. But I didn't have to turn off. The fat tracks headed right off through the woods along the same shortcut Timothy and I had used yesterday.

Timothy wasn't there yet, and because I couldn't wait to try my sled on the hill and not because I was afraid to follow the tracks alone, I stopped at the place we'd climbed over yesterday. The snow had drifted along the inside of the fence, almost hiding the pickets from view. I figured that with just a little more accumulation it would have covered the top, then my silver sled could carry me all the way from the top of the hill, over the fence, and deep into the woods, where the trees would provide a test of steering skill or a fast stop. I climbed the fence, sled in hand, then carried armfuls of snow to the highest drift, scooping and shoving until the tops of the pickets were covered. When I was satisfied the sled would glide over, I looked around for Timothy, who might still be opening his presents for all I knew, then I started to the top of the hill. I was only a little bit wary about the grass cutter, for I figured it would get clogged if it came out in the snow, but you never know what else a crazy lady who sent out grass cutters to hack up kids might have. But the little house at the top was almost completely snow covered, and there was no sign of smoke. Either Timothy's father got her that new heat exchanger or she froze.

At the top of the hill, not too close to the house in case she was just sleeping and not dead, I extended the sled, putting the runners in their widest configuration to keep me atop the deep snow. I climbed on and took off, the Teflon bottom gliding like ice on ice, and the wind stinging my face, and my heart beating with joy at the sled's speed on its very first trial run. Only trouble was that the wide runners didn't steer very well as I picked up speed, and there being no beaten path in the snow, I wasn't completely certain I'd be on target to make my fence jump. I pulled hard to the right,

and the sled came with it sluggishly, but enough so I started to think again that I would make the jump. I could see the pickets on either side, and those would make a painful stop, but I was going to make it and know what it was like to fly on a sled for a few meters, or I would have known if I hadn't overcorrected just before hitting the big drift. The sled skidded along the downside of the drift and into a hole. I hit on something that sent me flying. I came down hard, hurt and crying, upside down.

It took me a minute to realize that I wasn't badly hurt, just scraped and bumped here and there, and stuck. My head felt funny, almost like someone was choking me and pressing against my skull, but it wasn't so bad that I couldn't see once I stopped crying. But I couldn't get loose. I could get hold of the fence and turn a bit but not enough to unhook my foot, which was firmly wedged between two pickets as far as it could go. Try as I would, as nimble as I was, and as desperate in knowing that I was quite alone and there was no one to send for help, I could not get loose. I shouted for Timothy, prayed he would come out of the woods and get me loose, but he never came. I cried again, and my tears froze, and the plug in my mitten power pack must have come loose, because my fingers were cold, too. The woods were things with icy tentacles frozen to the sky, and the sun reflected brightly off the snow-topped world and made me cry again. The wide expanse of sky looked vast and forbidding and somehow confirmed my worst fears that there was no one but me within a million clicks. And I wondered how long a person could live upside down. Didn't they do that all the time out in space? It had made Timothy's aunt weird but, oh, Timothy's aunt! Maybe her house had ears as well as eyes, and I shouted and shouted, promising I'd never throw snowballs at her house again. I thought that all the blood in my body was pooled behind my eyeballs, and if I cried again my tears would be blood, and I wanted to cry again because I knew that Timothy's aunt never would come because she never went anywhere.

And then in the stillness of the morning, when there was nothing to hear in the snowpacked world but my crying, I heard what sounded like an animal breathing into a microphone — a very powerful microphone or a very big animal.

I held my breath and listened carefully, watching the woods, terrified that the creature was lurking there behind the snow-covered bushes. But I was hanging upside down, and it took me a moment to realize that the sound was coming from behind me, closer now, hissing. I turned wildly and pressed my face against the pickets to see what was on the other side.

A towering hulk.

Shoulders like a gorilla.

White as the snow.

Breath making great clouds.

Feet leaving massive tracks.

There wasn't a doubt at all in my mind that I'd finally found Bigfoot, and it was more awful than anything I had imagined.

I screamed and struggled, quite willing to leave my foot behind in the fence, if only that were possible. I tried to unsheathe my knife, and I dropped it in the snow. It was within reach, and I might have retrieved it, but the massive creature grabbed me by my coat-tails and hefted me up. With my foot free I kicked blindly, and I must have hurt it because it finally put me down. The fence was between us, but its hand still gripped me by the shoulders — smooth hands without fur, white and slightly slick looking, except there were wrinkles where the joints ought to have been, and those were like gray accordion pleats. I stood, dazed and dizzy from being on my head so long, staring up at Bigfoot's shiny eye. Her face was featureless but for the eye, and she still hissed angrily, and she had a vapor trail drifting out from her backside.

She let go of me, reached over to pick up the knife, and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger. The crystal flashed in the sunlight, just like the ads they'd filmed on L-5. She flipped it, and I caught it two-handed. I backed away toward where my sled lay, didn't bother to collapse it, but grabbed the cord. I ran for the woods.

When I looked back, Bigfoot was gone, but her tracks left a clear trail to the desolate little house at the top of the hill, where Christmas was wholly a video event, where Timothy's crazy aunt would rather starve to death than come out for food. And sometimes when it snowed, especially when it snowed on Christmas Day, I climbed over the fence of her universe to wipe the drifts of snow off the eyes of her house. It felt like glittering Christmas stars, peaceful again for all the world.