

Chapter 25

Searching for Bigfoot and Finding Faith in the Long Stride

I kept a flashlight in a box with an old hemp rope tied up in knots

And a paperback book called Looking for Sasquatch Out in Your Backyard

“Searchin”

For most kids, their first sense of spirituality comes wrapped in the religion of their parents. You learn about the concepts of God, sin, and redemption as an altar boy or in Sunday school. You see your place in the world through your parents’ reflection and their explanation of the unknown. I can’t speak for any of my friends, but my own sense of spirituality did not arrive on that dogma train. Faithful to the pop culture of the time, my understanding of spirituality and the concept of believing in the unseen came via the legend of Sasquatch.

Except for disco, lawn darts, and Generation Xers, nothing is as quintessentially 1970s as the legend of Bigfoot, or what the Coast Salish Indians call “Sasquatch.” Most mainstream scientists never took legends of the creature seriously, but in the 1970s the average person could legitimately discuss the possibility of its existence without being branded a total crackpot.

Grover Krantz was arguably the most famous mainstream scientist to risk his professional reputation on the question of Sasquatch. He was a professor of physical anthropology at Washington State University, with a passion for evolutionary anthropology and the fringe field of cryptozoology. He dared to show clinical interest in and devote his entire second-act career to the possibility that a bipedal creature shared the shadows with man. Though eventually marginalized by his academic peers, Krantz was tenacious in his research, controversial in his theories, and passionate in his belief of the creature’s existence. The latter earned him a great degree of scorn

and insult; he endured the cancellation of multiple research grants, the outright rejection of his research by his peers, and even the delay of his university tenure.

His belief in the creature's existence originated from careful study of hundreds of plaster footprint casts, many of which included detailed oddities like dermal ridges akin to fingerprints and evidence of heavy impact injuries—peculiarities that only a trained physical anthropologist could detect and that the average hoax-maker certainly wouldn't think to or even be able to replicate. In addition, peculiar muscle kinetics of the now-iconic 1967 Patterson-Gimlin film of an alleged Sasquatch traversing the rocks at Bluff Creek, California, further impressed Krantz. He postulated that Sasquatch could reasonably be some remnant population of the great ape *Gigantopithecus*, which crossed the Bering Land Bridge into North America some eleven thousand years ago, rather than going extinct in Asia with the rest of their kin.

Grover Krantz was unknown to us on Starmount, and even if he had existed in our orbit, his theories would have flown far over our heads. We knew, however, that adults, serious adults, were asking questions about the creature and so were we.

Nineteen seventy-seven was also the year Bigfoot arrived on the big screen when the movie *Sasquatch: The Legend of Bigfoot* came out with major theater distribution. That fact alone should tell you something about the times. The B movie was a horror docudrama about a serious scientific expedition into the unexplored wilderness of the Pacific Northwest. By the time we saw it, the Sons of Starmount were already knee-deep in our own expeditions for Bigfoot, so seeing the film version of how we viewed our day-to-day experiences was mind-blowing. We were as sure of the creature's existence as Grover Krantz and as dramatic in our efforts to find it as Hollywood. The thought of something truly wild and undiscovered passing through our backyards, just out of view,

was no longer just the purview of a ten-year-old's imagination. As of the summer of 1977, Bigfoot was a folklore fad throughout much of the country, and a bona fide possibility.

The Sons of Starmount operated beyond the reach of the adult shame that comes from asking ridiculous questions or wondering aloud about absurd ideas. As a result, on more than one occasion, one of us would make an outlandish statement of fact about Bigfoot.

“I’m sure I saw it last night when the rest of you were sleeping.”

“I know that looks like dog shit, but if you get real close to it, you can tell it’s obviously Bigfoot shit. I mean, that’s a pretty big pile of shit, guys.”

Then there were the more thoughtful, strategic statements, such as, “Hey guys, think about it: our woods are surrounded by the mall and three major roads. I’m pretty sure that one got stuck in here after they built all that stuff.”

Even the dorkiest of pronouncements went unjudged by the group. This was due in part to our consistent *Three Musketeers* ethic, but we also simply thought that even the most brazen statement might not be total bullshit, and, in the end, none of us wanted to be on the wrong side of monster history.

We spent just as much time discussing the creature and planning its capture as we did actually hunting it. We challenged one another with epic questions, and our fair share of inane ones, too.

“If Bigfoot doesn’t really exist, then why do so many people keep seeing him?”

“Is Bigfoot half-gorilla and half-monster, or just a big hairy guy who works out and doesn’t shave?”

We didn’t have the vocabulary to describe the plausible explanation of Bigfoot being some evolutionary hiccup, but we knew that sometimes things in nature didn’t work out the way they

should and that sometimes animals could look freakishly weird. The two-headed turtle and the five-legged frog we had seen at the pond had taught us that much.

We saved our debates for the finer points of Bigfoot lore because we found it unnecessary to question its actual existence.

We also discussed detailed plans for catching one alive. Each plan involved some combination of ropes, nets, and rattraps. We brainstormed and experimented with all types of Bigfoot bait. Would it like hamburgers, hotdogs, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, or grass clippings? Could we use our fishing poles, baited with worms and Sunbeam bread, casting out into the dark woods, waiting for a nibble, and then reeling one back in to the streetlight-bathed pavement?

"Yeah, we can catch one just like a land shark." I floated that idea myself. And yes, we believed in land sharks, too.

We went so far as to create specific mission assignments for one another. First, one of us would flush Bigfoot out with the kind of scream that only a mother could tolerate, let alone love. Then, once the creature was out in the open, someone, most likely Jim or me, would jump on its back, while the others would shoot at it with various projectiles. Finally, our clean-up man, probably John or Timmy, would have the job of standing at the ready with a net and a Polaroid camera.

The legend of Bigfoot and the hunt for proof of its existence filtered through most of our regular activities. No matter what the plan was, we were ready to pivot into the creature's path at a moment's notice. In our minds, you just never knew when Bigfoot might appear. It could pop out at the end of the cul-de-sac to greet the winner of the daily Big Wheel race down the street. It could surface from the middle of the eerie Hidden Pond way back in the woods, like some big hairy submarine going to periscope depth. It could even hide in the metal shed in my backyard

when it got tired of getting rained on. Though we kept an eye on each of these places, we all knew the one place it was certain to live: Death Valley, that dark and mysterious maze-like section of the deep woods.

Death Valley held secrets we could only dream of knowing. We felt completely out of our element there, which was not a familiar feeling for us anywhere. It drew us in like some big spiderweb-covered door that hid all of life's answers. We were certain that Bigfoot's lair was nestled deep within the area's prickly, protected ravines. Every time we ventured into that territory, we made sure to bring every weapon in our arsenal. We set traps, hung ropes, and hid in briar bushes. And we never went to Death Valley alone. Ever. No matter what. We were quiet and attentive while hunting Bigfoot there, and quiet was not one of our more exercised attributes.

The technical literature we studied, like the one Bigfoot book at the school library and, of course, movies like *Sasquatch*, *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, and *Creature from Black Lake*, starring Jack Elam and his scary lazy eye, taught us that Bigfoot made high-pitched yelping sounds, which we listened for. We knew that the creature threw rocks and branches. We threw rocks and branches at each other all the time, so that didn't really concern us. But we still listened carefully for crashing in the brush, especially when it got dark. Even when we knew the streetlights were coming on and it was a school night, and we had to book it home fast, we listened. We listened for heavy, man-like footsteps. We listened for growls and high-pitched whines or moans. We listened for the sound of our traps springing in the darkness and for the woods to go completely silent.

Silence in the woods was the telltale sign that Bigfoot was near, but the woods were never silent, especially when we were in them. And when we were out there, trying to be quiet and discerning, all we ever heard was the occasional scurrying of a squirrel, a pinecone dropping from a nearby tree, and, of course, the sound of someone farting and blaming it on the next guy.

“Dude, was that you or Bigfoot?”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Yes, it was.”

“No man, really. I don’t fart that loud.”

“Shut up already, I’m trying to listen here.”

Once personal noises began puncturing the woods around us, other sounds rolled in mercilessly: intense gum chomping, followed by an embarrassed yawn, and then someone inevitably saying, “I’m hungry. He’s not coming; let’s go home.”

Once we made the decision to head for home, especially after spending the late afternoon in Death Valley, our egress was fast, intense, and deliberate. We were hell-bent on two things: surprising Bigfoot and keeping Bigfoot from surprising us.

We kept looking for it where we thought it should be. Sometimes we stared so intently into the darkness that we convinced ourselves the darkness was staring back. For us, Bigfoot was like the phantom pain where an amputee’s limb used to be. Though we never once saw the creature, we sure felt its presence. We felt it all the time. It made our skin crawl and shot surges of adrenaline-charged electricity through our bodies. We heard the thump, thump, thump of agitated heartbeats in our ears and felt the subtle nausea that comes from being close to a threat but not being able to see it. We were as sure of its existence as we were of our own legs and arms.

The thrill and pride that would come from catching such an elusive creature, one that grown-ups could never subdue and, increasingly, not even believe in, haunted our days in the best way possible. On bikes and bare feet, with homemade spears, traps, and a collective conscience, we were never more or less than a single step behind our prey. Walking through those mysterious

woods marked the last time I ever searched for something and did not find it. In that sense, the story of the Sons of Starmount is as much a story about lasts as it is firsts.

We believed in the mystery of an unknown entity, the shadows behind the shadows, and not in the manner in which we believed in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. We were begrudgingly aware of the improbability of these two figures, but our souls stirred at the promise of Bigfoot's existence. That's a heavy thought for a bunch of eight, nine, and ten-year-olds, especially when juxtaposed with our other concentrated thoughts, like flashlight-tag strategy, thumb-wrestling tactics, and who could pee the farthest—heavy thoughts, indeed.

Belief in Bigfoot was my first lesson in the art of faith. My family was never particularly religious, and I daresay I am even less so today, if that's even possible. But I am a profoundly spiritual soul. No amount of religion or philosophy ever came close to the education in spirituality that I received from the legend of Bigfoot as a ten-year-old. I understand what it means to believe in things unseen and unproven. I feel the weight of otherworldly influences in my life. I am keenly aware that I am not alone and that I am part of something much bigger than what my rational self allows me to understand.

As a freshman at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., the curriculum forced me to study all the major religions of the world—western, eastern, and even a few cults. Sister Josephine blessed me with the opportunity to enjoy Religion 101 twice. The first time I took her class, it was scheduled for Monday mornings at 8:00 a.m. That seemed an undue burden on an already irreverent, beer-drinking college freshman. Let's just say I fell somewhat short of the nun's expectations the first time around.

As an assignment during my Religion 101 do-over class, and for a few other specific life events, I have, against my better judgment, attended traditional church services. I have always felt

like an outsider to religion, only able to relate to the music during and the food after a few black Baptist services. In some peoples' eyes, I imagine I'm considered a heretic. I've certainly been called that and worse. In fact, someone once called me a "Devil-worshipping atheist." In a bar, of all places. Now, I don't pretend to be any kind of religious scholar, so correct me if I'm wrong, but you can't be both an atheist and a devil-worshipper, right? Don't you have to be one or the other? Not that I care, or need you to care, but I am not, in fact, either of those things. For better or for worse, I try to use my head to deal with life's most challenging questions, because the heart tends to do what the heart will do. It's a sweet and caring organ, but sometimes a little slow, and dare I say, impulsive too.

With that in mind, I have also studied many of the world's great philosophers, mainly via my university classes, but also through some unusual travel opportunities. I have read the works of the famous thinkers, from Immanuel Kant to John Locke, Thomas Aquinas to René Descartes, Plato to Aristotle. They all left me more open-minded and less judgmental than I had been before, but that's about it. With the single exception of Robert Fulghum's musings in *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, religion and philosophy have fallen far short of inspiring me when compared to the lessons I learned about faith while searching for Bigfoot.

The creature helped me understand that the one prerequisite for any higher power is that it needs to be felt more than it needs to be seen or heard. But not by much. Now before the devout soul in you takes too much offense, understand that, in the end, my spiritual self is not entirely tied to the belief in a ten-foot-tall, eight-hundred-pound bipedal creature with a seven-foot stride. My spirituality, however, is entirely driven by the power of all things wild. One could say that the tenets of my religion are mountains, rivers, meadows, oceans, forests, and the wild blue yonder. My spiritual self draws its power from the energy I feel in nature and the vast expanse of beauty

and mystery, known simply to me as “wilderness.” The peace I feel walking through nature, among endless river valleys, and along mountain hollows must be akin to the most pious perception of being saved or chosen for the rapture. And if it’s not, well, then I admit I’m missing out. I would never have come to know the power of wilderness, nor the power of blind faith, without my time on Starmount.

Believing in something unseen and unproven is easy when everyone else believes in the same thing. Blind faith is safe to talk about when accepted as a cultural norm, even a social expectation. But belief in things unseen and universally mocked is faith on an entirely different level. Even though I had the comfort and confidence of my friends, my belief in Bigfoot and my gut feeling that there are energies beyond what I can see or prove ended up being my personal aha moment.

Telling everyone I believed in Bigfoot made it okay for me to think differently. It was acceptable to talk about all things wonderful and ridiculous. I could listen to my own heart and boldly believe any damn thing I wanted to. Starmount, in the end, was a lucky break for me. Because if at a young age, life fails to afford you the freedom to search for what may not exist or to find spirituality in the most peculiar corners of your life, well, then good luck acquiring that opportunity and skill as an adult.

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The wilderness can be remarkably harsh and coldly unforgiving, but it is not innately judgmental, and it certainly doesn’t discriminate. That’s what I love about it. But there are few places left in this world that are truly untamed. Today, it is a monumental struggle to experience nature, rugged

and untouched, and that disturbs me greatly. That struggle haunts my mind and soul far more than any lurking existential question about God ever could.

To stand on the edge of a wilderness unmarked by footprints other than my own and that of the creatures who belong there seems an impossibility now. And if not wholly impossible, it certainly requires far more effort than throwing on my smiley-face T-shirt, bell-bottom jeans, and worn-out Chuck Taylors and simply walking out my backdoor and into the woods.

My need to experience wilderness now borders on addiction, enabled by a near-perfect childhood and exposure to the concept of a natural high. I have felt that kind of high while listening to the sound of loons on remote Precambrian Quetico lakes or timber wolves on a moon-soaked ridge. I have felt it atop the active volcano Villarrica in southern Chile. I have felt it while walking the ancient Kootenai game trails of the Cabinet Mountains in western Montana, where lawbreaking grizzly bears banned from Yellowstone National Park were set free to work through their delinquency.

I am lucky to have lost count of the number of opportunities I've had to experience nature thus far. Knowing that it is the center of my being and that it is so quickly disappearing is as disquieting to my soul as any evil presence could ever be.

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I don't often tell people, but even today, I look for Bigfoot around every darkened corner in the Tennessee backcountry. I lean out my tent-flap door in the middle of the night, listening for the sound of heavy footsteps walking the outer edges of camp while I sniff the air for that savage rotten smell. I need to believe there is a Bigfoot in the woods as much as some need to believe there is a

God in heaven. And as far as an afterlife goes, if there are pine trees, rushing rivers, mountain peaks, and rolling meadows there, then count me in. Hopefully doing my part to protect them here on Earth will gain me some degree of preference if the time ever comes for me to defend my life to some heavenly auditor.

The child-like belief in something as-yet undiscovered, something hard or impossible to understand, or something that others may not feel is even valid now defines my adult faith. I am half a century through this life now, and I have a *Got Bigfoot?* sticker on the back of my 2000 Jeep Cherokee and a Bigfoot air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror. Both things are so foolishly immature and silly. I mean, I'm never going to see something as unique and as magically elusive as Bigfoot while I'm looking back at where I've been. That is the kind of momentous event reserved for looking as far forward as I possibly can, as I did when I was ten.

And let's just be real for a moment. Everyone knows that Bigfoot smells like a cross between a skunk in heat and a pile of half-rotten flesh, so a Bigfoot air freshener dangling from my rearview mirror? That's just pure mockery.