

“It isn’t that I don’t believe you.”

Cookie chose her words judiciously, one chubby hand gripping the cleaver. She waved it with random gestures.

Thwack! One sweet onion became two. Cookie snatched a half and whacked it like a sous chef.

“It’s a tad far-fetched, Marv.”

“I’m telling the truth,” said Marv. “I saw one of them standing in line at the bank.”

“Where were *you*?” Cookie slurped her steaming coffee. It was hot and dribbled to her ample bosom. She covered her mouth, and groped the kitchen sink. Pouring cold water in a glass, she took a hefty sip, ballooning her cheeks.

“Two places behind him.”

Cookie aimed her stream at the sink drain, scoring a hole-in-one.

“How do you know it was a ‘him’?” Cookie’s Orphan Annie curls and backup chin jiggled as she worried the coffee stain.

“They’re bigger.” Marv watched her jiggle.

Cookie stopped her frenetic rubbing and shifted her gaze to her devoted, rotund husband at his usual post at the kitchen table, working on a puzzle.

“Not always.”

“I saw another one at Caffeinati Coffee. Ordered a cappuccino.”

“How do you know it was a cappuccino?”

“When I ordered my latte, one was at the pick-up counter.” Cookie thought Marv might disintegrate on the spot. His trembling hand repeatedly stroked his grey head.

“Marv, are you off your meds again?”

“I wasn’t hallucinating, Cookie.”

“Well, I haven’t seen them. You spend too much time with your puzzles. Take a break. I know how you get when you can’t find a piece. Don’t we, Mister Moose?” Cookie baby-talked at the distorted moose on her coffee mug.

“We’ll go downtown tomorrow, you’ll see for yourself,” said Marv.

“All right, Puzzle-Boy, time for bed.” Cookie rose and kissed Marv good night.

She flipped off the light and they lifted themselves upstairs to bed.

The next morning, Marv drove Cookie downtown. Traffic was heavy, with summer market going on. Parking was tough.

“There’s a parking place, grab it!” Cookie loved when things made sense to her.

Marv eased the light-green Prius into position, cut the engine and looked at Cookie.

“Are you ready for this?”

Cookie scanned the moving sea of people. She didn’t know what to expect. *Marv is so insistent*, she thought.

*I'll humor him until I prove him wrong.* She rocked in her seat, gnawing her thumbnail.

Marv pointed at the Caffeinati Coffee espresso shop. “Feel like a latte?”

“Sure,” said Cookie. They got out and walked to the coffee shop.

Once inside, they queued in the order line. Cookie noticed a foul stench.

“There.” Marv motioned his head toward a wall with vivid, framed artwork.

Cookie squinted at the lofty, thick figure gazing at a watercolor of spawning salmon. She rummaged her purse for her glasses and fumbled them crookedly onto her fleshy nose.

Marv waited. Cookie didn't move. She froze, like Lot's wife, who turned to salt when she looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah.

The figure turned to face the room. A cardboard coffee cup lifted to a mouth that wasn't quite right, with an arm that wasn't quite right. Cookie tilted her head, trying to make sense of the image, but her middle-aged brain was stuck in a that-does-not-compute mode.

*Maybe it's a sales gimmick,* thought Cookie.

“Well? Do you see him or don't you?” Marv demanded.

“Uh-huh.”

“Still think I'm loony-tunes?”

“Don't say that.” Cookie's lips moved, but the rest of her didn't.

“Marv, he's so—hairy.”

“Yes. He is. What I can't figure, is why no one else notices him.”

Cookie glanced around at people busy with phones, laptops, laughter, and conversation. *Am I dreaming?* She pinched herself. Hard.

“This is nothing, said Marv. “Come outside.”

Marv pulled her out of line and tugged her toward the door. Cookie’s gaze stayed on the oddball figure sipping coffee as she crab-walked with her husband out the door.

Cookie halted on the sidewalk, fumbling a pair of sunglasses.

“Look, over there!”

Cookie squinted, then swapped her sunglasses for eyeglasses, wriggling them on. This one was taller than the one in the coffee shop. Apparently female, strolling along, wearing a floppy straw hat with a large, flowered bow and a shoulder purse draped over her shoulder. Cookie adjusted her crooked glasses for a better look, but the female ducked inside a shop.

“Marv, the city organized this for the tourists.”

“But, look how they’ve assimilated to human culture—like extra-terrestrials in the movies,” said Marv.

“No one notices brown bears walking on hind legs in downtown Anchorage?” Cookie pressed Marv’s arm.

“Apparently not.”

“They’re people in animal suits, Marv! Remember Seymour, the dancing moose? And that chorus line—a bear, and a sheep, I think—it’s a tourist gimmick,” Cookie waved off the strolling bear.

“I thought the same thing,” said Marv.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I thought I was having another breakdown. Maybe I am.”

“If you are, then I am, because I see them too. How can we both be having breakdowns at the same time?” Cookie’s heartbeat felt like a pulse setting on a food processor.

“No! Can’t deal with this—I’m going home,” Cookie flapped her hands, fearing a panic attack.

“Not yet, we need to know for sure,” said Marv.

*Cookie, don’t lose your grip.* She stuffed several sticks of gum in her mouth and chomped. She pressed her chest, taking deep breaths.

“Okay fine. The next one I see, off comes the head! Then we’ll know.”

“Not sure that’s a—good approach.”

“Why not?”

“Didn’t you see the Caffeinati bear’s tongue—long, like a dog’s tongue, lapping his coffee? Didn’t sip it like a human. That was no animal suit.”

“Bears don’t drink coffee, bears don’t drink cappuccinos.” Cookie rolled her eyes and marched down the sidewalk.

A bear loomed abruptly around the corner on hind legs, immense front paws, one up, one down, holding a bag, staring straight ahead. Cookie almost ran into it.

“Aaaarrh!!!”

People turned to see who screamed. Cookie choked up, pointing at The Bear. This one wore Carhartts, clutching a Nordstrom bag. It strolled, unnoticed, past people clustered on the sidewalk.

“Don’t you see The Bear?” shouted a crazed Cookie, still pointing. “Walking on its hind legs?”

“Smoke another one, lady!” someone yelled, followed by laughter.

Cookie stood, mouth open, then dropped her arm to her side. *They think I’m crazy.*

“You forgot to take its head off,” smirked Marv.

“He caught me off guard.” Cookie’s hand pressed her heaving chest. She’d seen him walk up the steps to the wildlife museum and go in.

“Let’s follow him,” said Cookie. “He has to show ID to get through security.”

They huffed up the steps to the foyer, but The Bear was tucked inside the building. Cookie rummaged her purse for her driver’s license. She displayed it to the security guard, like a cop showing a badge at a crime scene. It was upside down.

Cookie squinted at his name tag. “Stan Stanicich, please say you saw The Bear come through here.” She shoved her license into her purse.

Marv stepped beside her, raising eyebrows at Stan.

Stan eyed Cookie, then Stan, then Cookie’s upside down ID and grinned.

“That’s good. Who put you up to this?” When Stan looked behind them, Cookie and Marv scooted through security.

“Hey, need to see your ID’s!” Stan called after them.

“Hey Mike!” Stan motioned at a security guard, flirting with a blonde. “Cover me.”

Stan caught up to Marv and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Need to see your ID, no matter how funny your joke is.”

Cookie whirled on him. “This is no joke,” she hissed.

“Sorry, ma’am, don’t mean to offend,” said Stan, one hand raised.

“There he is!” Marv pointed.

Cookie wasted no time striding toward the upright bear standing in front of a wall-mounted television, watching a live web-cam of brown bears feeding on salmon. She stopped a good distance away, hands on hips.

The bear stood mesmerized, examining his own kind, one paw over the other, resting on his abdomen in a relaxed position.

“Tell me you don’t see a bear standing in front of this TV,” said Cookie, straining to keep her voice low and steady.

Stan stole a look at the theoretical bear position, then a reluctant look at Cookie.

“I’m sorry, the only bears are on TV and in that display case,” he gestured toward the center of the room, where a diorama of a stuffed grizzly stood on all fours, mouth gaping.

“Can’t you *smell* him, at least?” asked Cookie.

She pinched her nostrils. *Why can’t he smell it?*

“Okay, I get it—like that Jimmy Stewart movie, the one with the invisible rabbit named Harvey,” said Stan, nodding and smiling. “I liked that movie.”

“We don’t have an invisible bear,” said Marv.

“This is real life, Stan. Not a movie, not a dream,” said Cookie, tapping her foot.

Before Stan could respond, Cookie grabbed him and pulled him to the bear. She pushed his palm onto The Bear’s fur, rubbing it in circles, like waxing a car.

The invasive action startled the Carhartted bear and he reeled away, weaving around the animal display cases, blending into the crowd.

“Now, do you believe us?” Cookie demanded, hands on hips.

Stan studied the palm of his hand, then met Cookie’s gaze, like he’d seen a Martian.

“Yes! I do! I believe you!” Stan bolted after The Bear.

“I knew we weren’t losing it, Marv!” Cookie clasped her hands together, elated.

Stan’s skinny frame and long neck stretched like an ostrich as he gave chase. The bear had a head start, by the time Stan registered what happened.

“Mr. Stanicich, report to security!” A male voice squawked on an intercom.

Cookie and Marv paused in the center of the museum, searching for Stan and The Bear.

“He sees the bear, Cookie,” said Marv. “He saw it when he touched it.” Marv bounced on his toes, eyes sparkling.

Excited voices and yelling drew Cookie and Marv’s attention to the foyer. They followed the mayhem outside.

“Hey, get back here with that brief case!” screamed a familiar voice. “Stop that bear!”

Cookie and Marv arrived in time to see Stan chasing another bear down the middle of the street. This one hurried along in a business vest with a brief case, looking at his colossal paw as if late for a meeting.

Stan ran screaming after it until Cookie and Marv couldn't see him anymore. Seconds later, Stan stampeded back down the street toward the museum, hysterical, yelling into his shoulder mic.

“Run! Run! Get inside, everyone! Two bears grabbed a guy in Town Square Park!” Stan's eyes bulged, like Jimmy Stewart's in a Hitchcock movie.

Cookie and Marv noticed two disinterested bears across the street, walking side-by-side. They paused in front of a visitor's center, then went in.

Seconds later, one blue-jeaned, flannel-shirted bear emerged, holding a visitor's map, followed by another in pink spandex, flipping through a Milepost. Stan sprinted after them, screaming hysterically. The bears dropped to all fours, scuttling around a corner, Stan in hot pursuit.

Cookie covered her mouth with both hands. *I'm having a heart attack.* One hand clasped her chest, as if doing this would prevent her heart from violating her.

Stan returned gasping, to the wildlife museum. He bent at the waist, winded, as if he'd run a marathon. Still glued to the top of the museum steps, Cookie and Marv witnessed Stan melt down on a sidewalk full of tourists, screaming about bears on hind legs watching TV, wearing Carhartts, reading Mileposts, and carrying brief cases. His rants attracted a sizeable crowd.

A security guard burst through the door behind Cookie, muttering expletives into a shoulder mic. He motioned at two cops, who stopped to restrain poor Stan and cuff him.

“Marv, we have to help him! We should tell them we see the bears too!” But neither of them moved.

The crowd parted for an ambulance pulling up to the curb. The officers removed the cuffs, and paramedics wrestled Stan into a strait jacket. The paramedics loaded Stan on a gurney.

“I’m not crazy! There’s brown bears walking on hind legs all around Anchorage!” Stan was hysterical.

For Cookie and Marv, this was familiar territory.

The paramedics heaved the gurney into the ambulance. Stan lifted his head, shouting at Cookie and Marv. “It’s your fault! You’re the ones who made me see the bears! Tell them, *tell them!*”

The doors slammed, cutting off Stan’s helpless screams. The ambulance pulled away, siren blaring.

“Poor guy, they hauled him off to you-know-where,” said Marv.

“That can’t happen to us. We need to get out of here.” Cookie tugged Marv’s arm.

“You’re right, we can’t afford this,” muttered Marv, and they scurried back to the car.

Safely inside the Prius, Cookie chomped her gum. “Why is this happening?”

“I don’t know,” Marv leaned against the headrest, hand on forehead, calming himself.

“Evolution jumped a track and took a dirt road,” said Cookie, rolling her gum wad to the other side of her mouth. “But why? What caused the bears to act human?”

“Maybe—save their species, I don’t know,” Marv shrugged. “It’s a mystery.”

“Someone better solve it, PDQ. I feel bad not helping Stan—not telling them we see The Bears too.”

“They would have hauled us away, Cookie. We can’t go back.”

Marv pulled into the driveway and pressed the garage door opener. Once inside, he closed it. Cookie pushed herself out of the car and lumbered through the house, bolting doors, locking windows, pulling down shades. Marv plopped on a chair at the kitchen table while Cookie made dinner.

“I will not be a part of this evolution-gone-wonky thing, Marv,” Cookie gestured with her cleaver. “No one can know we see these bears. We can’t return to Cuckoo’s Nest—I won’t survive it this time. You know what it took for us to escape.”

“Don’t worry, there’s food in the freezer. We don’t have to leave the house for a while,” said Marv, pouring stale beer in a glass and gulping it.

“Speaking of the freezer—we gotta get the old couple out of there,” said Cookie. She popped a radish in her mouth. “How much longer can we get away with living in this house?”

“I’ve been telling people the Andersons moved and we bought the house.”

“I have an idea,” said Cookie. “Take them downtown. You know—for the bears.” She flashed a coy smile, then munched another radish.

“Clever girl, I love the way you think—and flipping Mrs. Anderson’s ID upside down.”

“I may have dyed my hair red like hers, but we still can’t take chances—can we, Mister Moose?” Cookie said to her coffee-cup moose next to her butcher block.

“Love you, Cookie,” said Marv, a robust twinkle in his eye.

“Love you, Marv,” purred Cookie, her cleaver poised.

Thwack! One juicy cucumber became two.

End